

WITNESS TO THE DEED





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## CHAPTER I.

### IN BENCHERS' INN.

“MY darling! Mine at last!”  
*Ting-tang; ting-tang; ting-tang.*

Malcolm Stratton, F. Z. S., naturalist, a handsome, dark-complexioned man of eight-and-twenty, started and flushed like a girl as he hurriedly thrust the photograph he had been apostrophizing into his breast pocket, and ran to the deep, dingy window of his chambers to look at the clock over the old hall of Bencher's Inn, E. C. It was an unnecessary piece of business, for there was a black marble clock on the old carved oak chimney-piece nestling among Grinling Gibbons' wooden flowers and pippins, and he had been dragging his watch from his pocket every ten minutes since he had risen at seven, taken his bath, and dressed; but he had forgotten the hour the next minute, and gone on making his preparations, haunted by the great dread lest he should be too late.

“Quarter to ten yet,” he muttered. “How slowly the time goes!” As he spoke he sniffed slightly and smiled, for a peculiar aromatic incense-like odor had crept into the room through the chinks in a door.

He stepped back to where a new looking portmanteau lay upon the Turkey carpet, and stood contemplating it for a few moments.



“Now, have I forgotten anything?”

This question was followed by a slow look round the quaint, handsomely furnished old oak-paneled room, one of several suites let out to bachelors who could pay well, and who affected the grim old inn with its plane trees, basin of water, and refreshing quiet, just out of the roar of the busy city street. And as Malcolm Stratton looked round his eyes rested on his cases of valuable books and busts of famous naturalists, and a couple of family portraits, both of which seemed to smile at him pleasantly; and then on and over natural history specimens, curious stuffed birds, a cabinet of osteological preparations, and over and around the heavy looking carvings and moldings about the four doorways, and continued from the fireplace up to the low ceiling. But, look where he would, he could see nothing but a beautiful face with large, pensive eyes, gazing with loving trust in his as he had seen them only a few hours before when he had said “good-night.”

“Bah! I shall never be ready,” he cried, with an impatient laugh, and crossing to one of the doorways—all exactly alike—he disappeared for a moment or two, to return from his bedroom with a black bag, which he hastily strapped, set down, paused to think for a moment, and then taking out his keys opened the table drawer, took out a check book, and sat down to write.

“May as well have enough,” he said merrily. “I’ve waited long enough for this trip, and a man does not get married every day. One—fifty. Signature. Bah! Don’t cross it, stupid!”

He tore out the check, threw back the book, and locked the drawer, before going to a door on the right-hand side of the fireplace, bending forward and listening.

“Wonder he has not been in,” he muttered. “Now let’s see. Anything else? How absurd! Haven’t finished my coffee.”



He took the cup from the table, drained it, and, after another look round, turned to the left side of the fireplace, where he opened a door corresponding to the one at which he had listened, went in, and returned directly with an ice ax and an alpenstock.

"May as well take them," he said. "Myra can use you."

He gave the alpenstock a rub with the table napkin before placing it and his old mountaineering companion against the bag. Then, bending down, he was busily strapping the portmanteau and forcing the tongue of the last buckle into its proper hole when there was a knock at the door behind him, and he started to his feet.

"Come in !"

The answer was a second knock, and with an impatient ejaculation the occupant of the chambers threw open the fourth door.

"I forgot the bolt was fastened, Mrs. Brade," he said, as he drew back to admit a plump looking, neatly dressed woman in cap and apron, one corner of which she took up to begin rolling between her fingers as she stood smiling at the edge of the carpet.

"Yes, sir," she said, "if I might make so bold, and I don't wonder at it. Oh, my dear—I mean Mr. Stratton, sir—how handsome you do look this morning !"

"Why, you silly old woman !" he cried, half laughing, half annoyed.

"Oh, no, excuse me, sir, not a bit. Handsome is as handsome does, they say, and you is and does too, sir, and happiness and joy go with you, sir, and your dear, sweet lady too, sir."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Mrs. Brade, but——"

"I always thought as you would marry some day, sir, as was only natural, but I never thought as a widow would be your lot."



"Mrs. Brade!" cried Stratton impatiently, and with his brows contracting a little. "I am very busy—not a moment to spare."

"Of course, sir, and no wonder; but I do wish it hadn't been such a dull morning."

"Dull?" cried Stratton, rushing to the window; "I thought it was all sunshine."

"Of course you did, sir; so did I; and well I remember it, though it's forty years ago."

"Mrs. Brade, I told you I was busy. I thank you for your congratulations, and I gave you all your instructions yesterday, so pray what do you want?"

Mrs. Brade, wife of the inn porter, lifted the corner of her apron to her mouth, and made a sound like the stifling of a laugh.

"I beg your pardon, sir, I'm sure, and of course it's natural at such a time. I came because you sent word by the waiter that I was to——"

"Of course, yes: about ten. I'm so busy, I forgot," cried Stratton hastily. "Look here, Mrs. Brade, I want you to go over to the bank; it will be open by the time you get across. Cash this check for me; bring all notes—tens and fives."

"A hundred and fifty pounds, sir?"

"Yes; take a hand bag with you. Don't get robbed."

"Oh, no, sir. I know too much of the ways of London town."

"That's right. Excuse my being hurried with you."

"Of course, sir; I know well what your feelings must be. (Sniff, sniff.) Why, you can smell Mr. Brettison a-smoking his ubble-bubble with that strange tobacco right in here."

As the woman spoke she went straight across to the door on the left of the fireplace.

"Here! where are you going?" cried Stratton.

"Back directly, sir," came in smothered tones, accom-



panied by the pulling of a bath chain, the gurgling of water, and the sound of shutting down a heavy lid.

"Lor', how strong Mr. Brettison do smell, sir. It's my memory's got that bad, sir," said the woman, reappearing and carefully shutting the door, "that I'm obliged to do things when I see them want doing, else I forgets. It was only yesterday that Mr. Brettison——"

"Mrs. Brade, the check, please."

"Of course, sir," said the woman hastily just as there was a little rat-tat at the brass knocker of the outer door, which she opened.

"Here is Mr. Brettison, sir," and she drew back to admit a spare looking, gray man, dressed in dark tweed, who removed his soft felt hat and threw it, with a botanist's vasculum and a heavy oaken stick, upon an easy-chair, as he watched the departure of the porter's wife before turning quickly and, with tears in his eyes, grasping Stratton's hands and shaking them warmly.

"My dear boy," he said, in a voice full of emotion, "God bless you! Happiness to you! God bless you both!"

"My dear old friend!" cried Stratton. "Thank you; for Myra, too. But come, you've repented. You will join the wedding party after all?"

"I? Oh, no, no, my boy. I'm no wedding guest. Why, Malcolm, I should be a regular ancient mariner without the glittering eye."

"I am sorry. I should have liked you to be present," said Stratton warmly.

"I know it, my boy, I know it; but no; don't press me. I couldn't bear it. I was to have been married, my dear boy. I was young, if not as handsome as you. But"—there was a pause—"she died," he added in a whisper. "I could not bear to come."

"Mr. Brettison!"



“There,” cried the visitor with forced gayety, “just what I said. No, my dear Malcolm. No, no, my boy. I’m better away.”

Stratton was silent, and his neighbor went on hastily :

“I heard you packing, and knocking about, but I wouldn’t disturb you, my dear boy. I’m off, too : a week’s collecting in the New Forest. Write to me very soon, and my dear love to your sweet wife—an angel, Malcolm—a blessing to you, my boy. Tell her to let you gather a few of the mountain flowers to send me. Ask her to pick a few herself and I’ll kiss them as coming from her.”

“I’ll tell her, sir.”

“That’s right ; and, Malcolm, my boy, I’m quite alone in the world, where I should not have been now if you had not broken in my door and came and nursed me back to life, dying as I was from that deadly fever.”

“My dear Mr. Brettison, if ever you mention that trifle of neighborly service again we are no longer friends,” cried Stratton.

“Trifle of neighborly service !” said the old man, laying his hands affectionately upon the other’s shoulders. “You risked your life, boy, to save that of one who would fain have died. But Heaven knows best, Malcolm, and I’ve been a happier man since, for it has seemed to me as if I had a son. Now, one word more and I am going. I’ve a train to catch. Tell your dear young wife that Edward Brettison has watched your career—that the man who was poor and struggled so hard to place himself in a position to win her will never be poor again : for I have made you my heir, Malcolm, and God bless you, my boy. Good-by ; write soon.”

“Mr. Brettison !” cried Stratton, in amaze.

“Hush !”

The door opened, and Mrs. Brade reappeared with a



black reticule in one hand and a ruddy telegram envelope in the other.

"I see, wanted already," said the old man, hastily catching up hat, stick, and collecting box, and hurrying out without another word.

"Telegram, sir ; and there's the change, sir."

"Eh ! The notes ? Thank you, Mrs. Brade," said Stratton hurriedly, and taking the packet he laid them on the table and placed a bronze letter weight to keep them down. "That will do, thank you, Mrs. Brade. Tell your husband to fetch my luggage, and meet me at Charing Cross. He'll take a cab, of course."

"I shall be there, too, sir, never you fear," said the porter's wife, with a smile, as she left the room, Stratton hurriedly tearing open the envelope the while, and reading as the door closed :

No bride's bouquet. What a shame ! See to it at once.

EDIE.

"Confound !" ejaculated Stratton ; "and after all their promises. Here, Mrs. Brade, quick. Gone !"

He threw open the door to call the woman back, but before he could open his lips she had returned.

"A gen—gentleman to see you, sir, on business."

"Engaged. Cannot see anyone. Look here, Mrs. Brade."

"Mr. Malcolm Stratton, I presume," said a heavily built man with a florid face, grayish hair, and closely cut foreign looking hair.

"My name, sir, but I am particularly engaged this morning. If you have business with me you must write."

This at the doorway, with Mrs. Brade standing a little back on the stone landing.

"No time for writing," said the stranger sternly. "Business too important. Needn't wait, Mrs. what's-your-name,"



he continued, turning upon the woman so sharply that she began to hurry down the stairs.

"I don't care how important your mission is, sir," cried Stratton ; "I cannot give you an interview this morning. If you have anything to say you must write. My business——"

"I know," said the man coolly : "going to be married."

Stratton took a step back, and his visitor one forward into the room, turned, closed the outer door, and, before Stratton could recover from his surprise, the inner door, and pointed to a chair.

"Sit down," said the man, and he took another chair and sat back in it.

"Well of all the audacious——!" began Stratton, with a half laugh ; but he was interrupted.

"Don't waste words, sir ; no time. The lady will be waiting."

As he spoke Stratton saw the man's eyes rest for a moment on the banknotes beneath the letter weight, and an undefined sensation of uneasiness attacked him. He mastered it in an instant, ignoring the last remark.

"Now, sir ; you say you have business with me. Let me hear it, since I must—at once."

"Ah, that's businesslike. We shall be able to deal."

"Say what you have to say."

"When you sit down."

Stratton let himself fall back into a chair.

"Now then. Quick !"

"You propose being married this morning."

"I do," said Stratton, with a sort of dread lest even then there should be some obstacle in the way.

"Well, then, you can't ; that's all."

"What !" cried Stratton fiercely. "Who says so ?"

"I do. But keep cool, young man. This is business."



"Yes ; I'll be cool," said Stratton, mastering himself again, and adopting his visitor's cynical manner. "So let me ask you, sir, who you may be, and what is your object in coming ?"

The man did not answer for a moment, but let his eyes rest again upon the notes.

"I say, who are you, sir ?"

"I ? Oh, nobody of any importance," said the man, with an insolent laugh.

Stratton sprang up, and the visitor thrust his hand behind him.

"No nonsense, Mr. Malcolm. I tell you this is business. Without my consent you cannot marry Myra Barron, formerly Myra Jerrold, this morning."

"I say, who are you, sir ?" cried Stratton furiously.

"James Barron, my dear sir—the lady's husband."

"Good God !"



## CHAPTER II.

### TWO SHOTS FROM A REVOLVER.

MALCOLM STRATTON started back with his eyes wild and his face ghastly, just as there was the faint sound of steps on the stone stairs, and directly after someone gave a long continued double knock on the outer door.

"Company, eh?" said the man, rising. "Get rid of him. I've a lot to say. I'll go in here."

He went straight to the doorway on the right of the fireplace.

"No, no," cried Stratton harshly; "that is a false door."

"False door?" said the man; "is this?"

He laid his hand upon the other on the left of the fireplace, and opened it.

"All right. Bath room. I'll go in here."

As the man shut himself in Stratton reeled as if he would have fallen, but a second *rat-tat* upon the little brass knocker brought him to himself, and, after a glance at the closet door, he opened that of the entry, and then the outer door, to admit a good looking, fair-haired young fellow of about five-and-twenty, most scrupulously dressed, a creamy rose in his buttonhole, and a look of vexation in his merry face as he stood looking at his white kid gloves.

"I say, old chap," he cried, "I shall kill your housekeeper. She must have black-leaded that knocker. Morning. How are you. Pretty well ready?"

"Ready?" said Stratton hurriedly. "No, not yet. I'm sure I——"

"Why, hullo, old chap; what's the matter?"



"Matter? Nothing, nothing."

"Well, you look precious seedy. White about the gills. Why, hang it, Malcolm, don't take it like that. Fancy you being nervous. What about? Packed up, I see."

"Yes—yes."

"Wish it was my turn," continued the newcomer. "Might as well have been two couples: Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm Stratton; Mr. and Mrs. Percy Guest. Why, I say, old chap, you are ill."

"No, no," cried Stratton hurriedly; and a sudden thought struck him.

Catching up the telegram from the table, he handed it to his friend.

"Hullo! Nothing serious? Poof! What a molehill mountain. You shouldn't let a thing like this agitate your noble nerves. Bless the dear little woman. I'll run on to Common Garden, Central Avenue, as we say in some suckles, bully the beggar for not sending it, start him, and be back for you in a jiffy."

"No, no," cried Stratton excitedly, "don't trust them. Get the bouquet, and take it yourself. Don't come back. I'll meet you at the church."

"All right, old chap. Your slave obeys. Only, I say, I would have a duet—S. and B.—before I started. Screw up, and don't come with a face like that."

The speaker went to the door, opened it, and looking round laughingly: "Precious dull; I'll tell 'em to turn on the sun," he said, and hurried out.

As the outer door closed Stratton darted to the inner and shut it, while, as he turned, his unwelcome visitor stepped out of the bath room—evidently formerly a passage leading into the next chamber—and returned to his chair.

"Best man—bouquets—carriages waiting—church—wedding breakfast," he said laughingly. "By Jove! I could drink a tumbler of champagne."



By this time Stratton had grown firmer, and, pointing to the door, he cried :

“Look here, sir ; I’ll have no more of this. You are an impostor. I don’t know where you obtained your information, but if you have come to levy blackmail on the strength of such a mad tale, you have failed ; so go.”

“To my wife ? ”

“To the police-station if you dare to threaten me. Look here : James Barron, otherwise James Dale, died two years ago.”

“Then he has come to life again, that’s all,” said the man coolly. “Now, look here, you ; I’ve not come to quarrel. I call on you, and of course it must be just dampening at such a time, but, you see, I had no option. It wasn’t likely that—be cool, will you ? Let that poker rest ! ”

He spoke savagely, and took a revolver from a hip pocket.

“I say it wasn’t likely that you would be pleased to see me, and I’m not surprised at your crying impostor, because, as I well enough know, the papers said I was dead, and for the past two years my beautiful little wife has worn her widow’s weeds.”

Stratton made a gesture to start forward, but the man sat back in his chair and raised the pistol.

“I’m a very good shot,” he said coolly. “Be quiet and listen. I’m an impostor, am I ? I was not married to Myra Jerrold, I suppose, directly after the old man had taken her for a continental tour with pretty, merry little Edie Perrin. Bless her—sweet little girl ! I’d rather have had her if she had possessed Myra’s money. It’s all right, my dear sir. I can give you chapter and verse, and commas and full stops, too, if you want satisfying. But you do not ; you know it’s all true. Why don’t I put in my claims ? Well, there is that little unpleasantness with the



police, and that is why," he continued as he toyed with the revolver. "I object to your calling them in to interfere. No, Mr. Malcolm Stratton, I shall not let you call them in for more reasons than one. Ah! you begin to believe me. Let me see now, can I give you a little corroborative evidence? You don't want it, but I will. Did the admiral ever tell you what an excellent player I was at piquet?"

Stratton started.

"Yes, I see he did. And how I used to sing "La ci darem" with Myra, and played the accompaniment myself? Yes, he told you that, too. My dear sir, I have a hundred little facts of this kind to tell you, including my race after Myra's horse when it took fright and she was thrown. By the way, has the tiny little red scar faded from her white temple yet?"

Stratton's face was ghastly now.

"I see I need say no more, sir. You are convinced Myra is my wife. There has been no divorce, you see, so you are at my mercy."

"But she is not at yours," cried Stratton fiercely. "You go back to your cell, sir, and she will never be polluted by the touch of such a scoundrel again."

"Polluted? Strong language, young man, and you are losing your temper. Once more, be cool. You see I have this, and I am not a man to be trifled with. I do not intend to go back to my cell: I had enough of that yonder, but mean to take my ease for the future. These chambers are secluded; a noise here is not likely to be heard, and I should proceed to extremities if you forced me."

"You dare to threaten me?"

"Yes, I dare to threaten you, my dear sir. But keep cool, I tell you. I didn't come here to quarrel, but to do a little business. Did you expect me? I see you have the money ready."

He pointed to the notes—notes to defray a blissful



honeymoon trip—and Stratton had hard work to suppress a groan.

“There, I’m very sorry for you, my dear sir,” continued the scoundrel, “and I want to be friendly, both to you and poor little Myra—good little soul! She thought me dead; you thought me dead; and I dare say you love each other like pigeons. Next thing, I admired her, but she never cared a sou for me. Well, suppose I say that I’ll be dead to oblige you both. What do you say to that?”

Malcolm was silent.

“I never wanted the poor little lass. Frankly, I wanted her money, and the admiral’s too—hang the old rascal, he won about fifty pounds of me. But to continue. Now, Mr. Malcolm Stratton, time is flying, and the lady will soon be at the church, where you must be first. I tell you that I will consent to keep under the tombstone where the law and society have placed me, for a handsome consideration. What do you propose?”

“To hand you over to the police,” said Stratton firmly, but with despair in his tone.

“No, you do not. You propose to give me the money on the table there, to sign an agreement to pay me three hundred a year as long as I keep dead, and then to go and wed your pretty widow, and be off to the continent or elsewhere.”

Bigamy—blackmailed by a scoundrel who would make his life a hell—through constant threats to claim his wife—a score of such thoughts flashed through Stratton’s brain as he stood there before the cool, calculating villain watching him so keenly. Money was no object to him. Mr. Bretison would let him have any amount, but it was madness to think of such a course. There was only one other—to free the innocent, pure woman he idolized from the persecution of such a wretch, and the law would enable him to do that.



Malcolm Stratton's mind was made up, and he stood there gazing full in his visitor's eyes.

"Well," said the man coolly, "time is on the wing, as I said before. How much is there under that letter weight?"

"One hundred and fifty pounds," said Stratton quietly.

"Write me a check for three hundred and fifty pounds then, and the bargain is closed."

"Not for a penny," said Stratton quietly.

"You will. The lady is waiting."

"So are the police."

"What!" cried the man, rising slowly and with a menacing look in his countenance. "No fooling, sir. You see this, and you know I shall not be trifled with. Once more let me remind you that a noise here would hardly be heard outside. But you are not serious. The prize for you is too great. Police? How could you marry the lady then? Do you think my proud, prudish little Myra would take you, knowing me to be alive? Stop, will you?" he cried with a savage growl like that of a wild beast, "or, by all that's holy—— Here, what are you going to do, fool?"

"Summon the police," cried Stratton, who was half way to the door, as the man sprang at him with the activity of a panther.

For the next minute there was a desperate struggle, as the men wrestled here and there, both moved by one object—the possession of the deadly weapon.

Then one arm was freed, there was the sharp report of a pistol, and a puff of ill smelling smoke partially hid the struggling pair.

Another shot with the smoke more dense.

A heavy fall.

Then silence—deathlike and strange.

Outside, on the staircase a floor higher, a door was



opened ; there were steps on the stone landing, and a voice shouted down the well :

“ Anything the matter ? ”

After a moment another voice was heard :

“ Nonsense—nothing. Someone banged his oak.”

There was the sound of people going back into the room above, and in the silence which followed, broken only by the faintly heard strain of some street music at a distance, the door below, on the first floor landing, was opened a little way, the fingers of a hand appearing round the edge, and a portion of a man's head came slowly out, as if its owner was listening.

The door was closed once more as softly as it was opened, and the sun, which had been hidden all the morning by leaden clouds, sent a bright sheaf of golden rays through the dust-incrusted staircase window, straight on to the drab-painted outer door, with the occupant's name thereon in black letters :

MR. MALCOLM STRATTON.
-----------------------



## CHAPTER III.

### A BAD QUARTER OF AN HOUR.

“WELL?”

“You rang, sir.”

“No, confound you ! I did not ring.”

“Beg pardon, sir, I’m sure, sir. ‘Letric bell’s a little out of order, sir. Telltales show wrong numbers, sir.”

“I engaged a suite of private rooms in this hotel, and there’s not a bit of privacy.”

“Very sorry, sir, indeed.”

“And look here, waiter.”

“Yes, sir.”

“When you address me it is customary to say Sir Mark.”

“Of course, Sir Mark ; my mistake, Sir Mark. I’ll mind in future.”

“Has the carriage arrived ? ”

“Not yet, Sir Mark.”

“Thank you ; that will do. No ; a moment. The wedding breakfast. Everything is quite ready, I hope ? ”

“The head waiter has it in ‘and, Sir Mark, and the table looks lovely.”

“Thanks. Ahem ! a trifle now. I shall remember you when I leave. I spoke a little testily just this minute. A little out of order, waiter. Touch of my old fever, caught in the East.”

The waiter smiled and bowed as he pocketed a new five-shilling piece, and looked with fresh interest at the fine looking, florid, elderly man who kept pacing the room with a newspaper in his hand as he talked.



"Anything more I can do, Sir Mark, before I leave the room?"

"Hang it all, no, sir," cried the old officer, flashing out once more irritably. "This is not a public dinner, and I have given you a vail."

"Of course, Sir Mark; and I didn't mean——"

"Then why did you use that confounded old stereotyped waiter's expression? I wonder you did not hand me a toothpick."

"I beg your pardon, Sir Mark, I'm sure."

"Go and read 'Peter Simple,' and take Chuck's, the boatswain's, words to heart."

"Certainly, Sir Mark," and the waiter hurried to the door, leaving Admiral Sir Mark Jerrold muttering, and in time to admit a charmingly dressed, fair-haired bridesmaid in palest blue, and wearing a handsome diamond locket at her throat, and a few bright pearls on her cheeks, living pearls, just escaped from her pretty, red-rimmed eyes.

"'Trencher scraping—shilling seeking—napkin carrying.' Ah, Edie, my darling—all ready?"

"Yes, uncle, dear; but, oh, you do look cross!"

She clung to his arm and put up her lips to kiss the old man, whose face softened at her touch.

"No, no, my dear, not cross; only worried and irritable. Hang it, Edie, my pet, it's a horrible wrench to lose her. No hope of that scoundrel Stratton breaking his neck, or repenting, or anything, is there?"

"Oh, uncle dear, don't. Myra is so happy. She does love him so."

"And her poor old father's nobody now."

"You don't think so, uncle," said the girl, smiling through her tears, as she rearranged the old officer's tie, and gave a dainty touch to the stephanotis in the buttonhole of his blue frock coat. "And you know you want to see



her happily married to the man she loves, and who loves her with all his heart."

"Heigho ! I suppose so."

"And I've come down to ask if you'd like to see her. They're just putting the last finishing touches."

"So we may," cried Sir Mark eagerly. "Does she look nice ?"

"Lovely, uncle ; all but——"

The girl ceased speaking, and looked conscious.

"Eh ? All but what ?"

"You will see, uncle, directly. I will not say any more about it. She would have her own way."

"Here, I'll come at once."

"No, no, uncle dear ; I'll go and fetch her down."

"And make a parade of her all through this confounded caravanserai of an hotel !" cried the old man testily. "I can't think why she persisted in having it away from home."

"Yes, you can, uncle dear," said the girl soothingly. "It was very, very natural. But do, do be gentle with her. She is so ready to burst into tears, and I want her to go off as happy as the day."

"Of course, Edie, my dear ; of course. I'll bottle it all up, and then you and your old fool of an uncle can have a good cry together all to ourselves, eh ? But I say, little one, no hitches this time in the anchorage."

"There very nearly was one, uncle."

"What !" roared the old man, flushing.

"But I set it right with a telegram."

"What—what was it ? Stratton going to shuffle ?"

"Oh, uncle, absurd ! The bouquet for the bride had not come."

"Pooh ! A woman can be married without a bouquet."

"No, no, uncle ! But I sent off a message, and Mr. Guest brought it himself."

"Then he has been again."



"Uncle ! Why, he's Malcolm Stratton's best man."

"He's the worst man I know. I loathe him."

"You don't, uncle."

"Yes, I do, and I'm not blind. Do you suppose I want to be left to a desolate old age. Isn't it bad enough to lose Myra without——"

"Oh, uncle !" cried the girl, whose cheeks were crimson, "there isn't a moment to lose ;" and she darted to the door, leaving the admiral chuckling.

"A wicked little pirate ! How soon she showed the red flag aloft. Ah, well, it's nature—nature, and one mustn't be selfish. Not much chance. I don't know what we're born for, unless it's to be slaves to other people."

He turned over his newspaper, and began running down the list of marriages.

"Here they are," he muttered, "all going the same way," and he stood musing sadly upon the question of the young women's quitting the old hives, till the door was opened again and Edie Perrin ushered in her cousin, tall, graceful, and with that indescribable look of love and happiness seen in a bride's eyes on her wedding morn.

"Here she is, uncle," cried Edie, who then uttered a sob, and rushed away with a rustling noise to hide the tears she could not restrain.

"My darling !" cried the old man huskily as he drew his child to his breast ; "and am I to feel that it is quite right, and that you are happy ?"

"Oh, so happy, father ; so content at last—at last," she whispered as she clung to him lovingly. "Only there is one thing."

"Eh ? What—what ?" cried the admiral excitedly.

"Leaving home and you."

The old man drew a deep breath full of relief.

"Oh, pooh, pooh, nonsense, my pet," he cried, looking



at her beautiful pensive face proudly ; " don't mind that ; I'm glad of it."

" Glad, father ? "

" No, no, not to lose you, my darling, but for you to go away with the man you love and who loves you. I hate him for taking you, but he is a splendid fellow, Myra. What a sailor he would have made ! "

" Yes, father."

" If they had not spoiled him by getting all that natural history stuff in his head. But I say, my darling," he continued as he held his child at arm's length, admiring her, but pushing up his hand.

" Yes, dear ? "

" Isn't this a little too—too punctilious ? Very lovely, dear ; you look all that a man could wish for, but it's a wedding, my pet, and you—you do not quite look like a bride."

" What do the looks matter ? " she said with a dreamy look in her large eyes.

" Well, I don't know. Woman ought to please her husband, and isn't it a mistake to dress—well, to parade that nonsense about your being a widow."

" Nonsense, dear ? " said Myra, smiling sadly. " It was no nonsense. Whatever that man may have been I swore at the altar to be his faithful wife."

" Till death did you part, eh ? Yes, yes, yes," said the admiral testily, " but he's dead and gone and forgotten ; there is no need to dig him up again."

" Papa ! "

" Well, I mean by going to what will be a real wedding in half mourning."

" Malcolm agreed that I was right, dear."

" Oh, then I'm wrong. Only, if I had known, I should have put my foot down—hard. Why, even Edie was hinting at it just now."



“Let the past rest, dear,” said Myra gently.

“After this morning—yes, my darling. But I always feel as if I ought to apologize to you, Myra.”

“No, no, dear.”

“But I say yes. The clever, plausible scoundrel dazzled me, and I thought your opposition only maidenly shrinking. Yes, dazzled me, with his wit and cheery manners, knowledge of the world, and such a game, too, as he played at piquet. It was ashore, you see, and he was too much for me. If I’d had him at sea it would have been different. I was to blame all through—but you forgive me all the misery I caused you?”

“My dear father!”

“Ah, there I am crushing your dress again. Stratton’s a lucky dog, and we’ll think it was all for the best.”

“Of course, dear.”

“Showed what a good true-hearted fellow he was—sort of probationer, eh?”

Myra turned her head. She could not speak—only clung to the parent she was so soon to leave.

“Then good-by to James Barron, alias Dale, and all his works, Myra. Oh, dear me! In a very short time it will be Mrs. Malcolm Stratton, and I shall be all alone.”

“No, you will not, uncle,” said Edie, who had entered unobserved after letting off a fusilade of sobs outside the door, and her pretty gray eyes a little redder, “and you are not to talk like that to Myra; she wants comforting. Uncle will not be alone, dear, for I shall do all I can to make him happy.”

“Bah! A jade, a cheat, my dear. Don’t believe her,” cried the admiral merrily; “she has a strange Guest in her eye—Hotspur—Percy. Look at her.”

“Don’t, Myra dear. Kiss uncle and come back to your room,” and after a loving embrace between father and daughter the bridesmaid carried off the bride to the room



where the traveling trunks lay ready packed, the bridal veil on a chair ; and after the last touches had been given to the bride's toilet, the cousins were left alone.

" Now, Myra darling, any more commands for me about uncle ? We may not have another chance."

" No, dear," said the bride thoughtfully. " I could say nothing you will not think of for yourself. Don't let him miss me, dear."

" You know I will not. Bless you, pet ; you happy darling, you've won the best husband in the world. But how funny it seems to have to go through all this again."

" Hush, dear. Don't—pray don't talk about it."

" I can't help it, Myra ; my tongue will talk this morning. Oh, I am so glad that it will be all right this time."

Myra's brow contracted a little, but her cousin rattled on.

" It has always seemed to me such stuff to talk of you as a widow. Oh, Myra, don't look like that. What a stupid, thoughtless thing I am."

She flung her arms about her cousin, and was again bursting into tears when there was a tap at the door, and she shrank away.

" Come in."

One of the lady's maids appeared.

" Sir Mark says, ma'am, that the carriages are waiting, and Miss Jerrold will not come up."

Myra took her bouquet and turned calmly to her cousin as the maid burst out with :

" God bless you, Miss Myra—I mean madame. May you be very happy."

The second maid was at hand to second the wish, and the pair performed a duet in sobs as the cousins swept down the broad staircase to the admiral's room.

" Time, my dear, time," cried Sir Mark jovially. " Come, Edie, aunt will be furious if you keep her any longer."

Edie took his arm, but dropped it again to run and kiss



her cousin once again. Then tripping to the old man's side he led her down the broad staircase and across the hall, now pretty well thronged with visitors, and the servants in the background to see the departure.

A carriage was in waiting, with a tall, stern looking, gray lady inside.

"Late, Mark," she said sharply. "Come Edie, my child, and let's get it over."

"You're all alike," said the admiral, as the bridesmaid took her place, the carriage started, and with head erect the old sailor strode back, seeing nobody, and went up to his room, to return soon after, amid a buzz of whispering, proudly leading down the bride.

"And only one bridesmaid," whispered a lady visitor at the hotel.

"Young widow—very private affair—by the lady's wish," was whispered back loudly enough for Myra and her father to hear as they passed down the steps.

"Let them chatter," said the old man to himself. "They haven't seen such a bride for years."

Quite a little crowd followed to the hotel door, there was a general waving of handkerchiefs, and one lady threw a bouquet of white roses as the carriage door was shut with a bang, the servant sprang up, and the next moment the admiral's handsome pair of bays dashed off toward the great West End church.



## CHAPTER IV.

### THE SCENE OF SHAME.

“**P**OOOR old chap ! ” said Percy Guest, with a laugh. “ Married ? Looked as if he was going to be hanged. Wonder whether I shall be as nervous and upset if—if—I ought to say when—it comes off ? No, not likely, bless her. Might be all in a fidget to get it over for fear of a slip, but I don’t think I should look like that.”

He was approaching the church as these ideas ran through his head, and a glance at the clock showed him that he was half an hour too soon, consequent upon being hurried off by his friend.

“ What shall I do ? ” he thought. “ No time to go anywhere else ; I’ll drop in and hang about in the church as if I did not belong to the party.”

Easier said than done. Already there was a little crowd collecting, attracted by the carpet laid up the steps—a little gathering of the people who always do attend weddings—those who wait till the bride arrives and then hurry in to see the service, and those who, being in charge of perambulators, keep entirely outside and block up pavement and porch. Then, too, there were the customary maiden ladies, the officials of the church, the bell ringers, the woman from the crossing at the corner of the square in a clean apron, the butchers’, bakers’, and fishmongers’ boys, and the children—especially those in a top-heavy condition from carrying other children, nearly as big as themselves.

Percy Guest was conscious of a whisper and a buzzing sound as he walked through the gates in what he intended



to be a nonchalant fashion, but which proved to be very conscious, and then most conscious as a boy cried :

“ 'Ere he is, Bill ! ”

Fortunately the church door was close at hand, but before he entered he was aware that the turncock had joined the throng with three bright instruments over his shoulder, as if his services were likely to be wanted toward the end.

Percy Guest breathed more freely as he stepped into the gloom of the silent church, but was again disconcerted by the beadle in his best gold-braided coat, holding open a green baize door and two pew openers stepping forward apparently bent upon showing him the way up to the chancel.

“ Thanks : I'll just look round,” he said carelessly ; but the words did not convey his meaning, and as he walked slowly into one of the side aisles to study tablets and monuments, he could not read a word for thinking that the two pew openers had seen through him.

“ What a fool I am ! ” he muttered. “ Of course they know. Even smell me. Wish I hadn't used that scent.”

An archæologist could not have taken more apparent interest than he in that tablet covered with lines of all lengths, setting forth the good qualities of Robert Smith, “ late of this parish,” but the study was accompanied by furtive glances at a watch during the longest quarter of an hour the young man ever remembered to have spent.

But it ended at last.

“ He'll soon be here now,” he said to himself as, carrying his new hat behind him, he made for another tablet nearer the chancel, while divers whispers behind him told of pews being filled by those who wished to have good places, and so another five minutes passed.

“ Time he was here,” thought the early arrival ; and summoning his fortitude ready for being stared at and



commented upon, he walked quietly toward the chancel, faced round, and waited, staring blankly at the three or four score of faces watching him eagerly.

"Pleasant!" he said to himself. "Must be some of the friends here, but how confoundedly awkward I do feel. I hate these quiet weddings. Company's good, even if you're going to be hanged. Why isn't Stratton here?"

There were fresh arrivals every minute, and Guest gazed anxiously now toward the door, but the arrivals were all female; and save that the clerk or vergier was arranging cushions and books up by the communion table, he was alone, and the center upon which all eyes were fixed.

"I've done wrong," muttered Guest as he mastered a strong desire to look at his watch, which he knew must now be within five minutes of the time. "I ought to have gone back and brought him on. It's too bad to leave me here like this."

If he could have taken out his handkerchief to have wiped the gathering drops away from his temples he would not have cared so much, for they produced a terrible itching sensation. But no; he must seem cool and collected.

He was conscious now of talking somewhere behind him, in the vestry evidently, a deep utterance suggestive of intoning a service, and a harsh, sharp voice.

The clergyman and just then the clerk came down, passed close by, looked at him, went and opened a pew door, and returned to approach him again with a deprecatory cough, as if he were about to speak, but he passed on again, and went back into the vestry.

"Took me for the bridegroom," muttered Guest to himself. "Stratton, you scoundrel, why don't you come? Oh! I'll pay you out for this."

At last! For a figure appeared at the other end of the



church. No ; it turned into a pew halfway down the center aisle, and Guest became cold with apprehension as the organ began to peal forth its softest notes to a hushed, shuddering bass, while Guest looked wildly down the church, where, to his horror, there stood a figure in company with a tall, sedate, gray-haired lady dressed in gray ; and as these figures approached he for a few moments forgot his agony in a long, rapt contemplation of the bridesmaid's face.

Then he could bear it no longer, and he was about to rush out and go in search of Stratton when he felt that it was too late, for already the admiral was at the door with the bride, and Edie and Miss Jerrold were at his side.

He gave Edie one quick glance full of agony, and then in a hurried whisper to the admiral's sister :

"Miss Jerrold, for goodness' sake ask Sir Mark to step into the vestry. Stratton has not come."

Too late—too late ! The organ was still giving forth its introductory strain ; the two clergymen moved out of the vestry, and took their places ; Sir Mark and Myra were close up, and the clerk came forward and signed to Guest to stand in the bridegroom's place.

Before he could think, the admiral's lips were close to his ear, and the sharp whisper thrilled him as if it had been a roar.

"Where's Stratton ? "

"I—he was to meet me—I—I'll go and see."

The words were stammered forth in a whisper, and no one better than he felt how tame and paltry they sounded, while as, hat in hand, he hurried down the aisle, running the gauntlet of a couple of hundred eyes, it seemed as if they stung him, that the looks were more mocking than wondering, while, raging with annoyance, the few yards felt lengthened out into a mile.

Through the baize doors, and under the portico, but no



sign of the brougham with the pair of grays that was to bring the bridegroom.

What to do ; jump into a hansom and bid the man gallop to Benchers' Inn ?

It would take best part of an hour, and Stratton must be there directly. He would wait and see, even if everyone in the crowd was staring at him wonderingly, while the cold sweat stood out in big drops upon his face.

"What is the meaning of this?" said a stern voice at his elbow, and Guest turned to face the admiral, whose florid countenance was mottled with white.

A few words of explanation followed and then :

"I'll take a hansom and gallop off to his chambers."

"No," said Sir Mark in a low, hoarse voice. "An insult to my child ! It is atrocious !"

The old man turned and strode back, while, hardly knowing what he did, Guest followed him between the two rows of curious faces to where Myra stood, perfectly firm and self-contained, while Edie was trembling visibly, and clinging to Miss Jerrold's arm.

As Sir Mark reached his daughter there was a loud whispering in the church, which was suppressed by several hushes ! as one of the clergymen approached the wedding party, all present being eager to catch his words as the *contretemps* was now grasped.

"Will you step into the vestry for a few minutes? Some trifling mishap, perhaps—to the carriage or one of the horses. Perhaps an error about the time."

"No, no," said the admiral sternly. "We will wait here, sir. No ; Myra, take my arm ; you shall not submit to this."

She was deadly pale, but she made no movement to obey.

"Not yet," she said in a low voice. "We must wait."

"It is impossible, I tell you !" cried the admiral loudly,



for his rage and mortification would have their way. "My dear girl! Hold up your head; the shame is not yours. Guest, take my sister and niece to the other carriage." Then, snatching Myra's hand, he led her back to the door, his gray beard and mustache seeming to bristle as his eyes flashed rage and defiance from side to side, till they reached the portico, where a man stepped forward.

"The bells, sir?" he whispered deferentially; "the ringers are all here?"

That was the last straw—a brazen one.

With an angry snort the admiral caught the man by the shoulder and swung him out of the way, signaling directly after for his carriage, which, as the coachman and footman had not expected to be wanted for some time yet, stood right away, with the servants chatting by the horses' heads.

Not above a minute before the carriage was drawn up, but it was like an age to those who listened to the whispering and giggling going on.

For the words "No bridegroom!" had reached the little crowd outside as soon as the retiring wedding party; and as Guest heard a remark or two made, there was a singing in his ears, and an insane desire to rush at some staring idiot and thrash him within an inch of his life.

But he glanced at Myra as he pressed Edie's hand against his side, and saw that the bride's head was erect and that she stepped proudly into the carriage. Then the admiral took his seat by her side and said firmly:

"Home!"

"To the hotel, sir?" said the footman.

"Home!" roared Sir Mark.

The footman sprang up to his seat, the carriage was driven off, and with the crowd increasing Miss Jerrold's took its place.

"Quick, Mr. Guest," whispered the admiral's sister. "She is fainting."



He had felt Edie's hand pressing more and more upon his arm, but in his excitement this had not struck him as extraordinary ; but now, as his attention was drawn to her, she dropped her bouquet, and in his effort to save her from sinking to the pavement the beautiful bunch of flowers was crushed under foot.

The next minute he had lifted the poor girl into the carriage, and handed the admiral's stern looking sister to her side.

Darting a look of agony at Edie's white face and the wreath and veil fallen aside, Guest drew back for the door to be closed, but Miss Jerrold made an imperious sign.

"No, no ; come with us," she said hoarsely. "You must help me ; and explain. I dare not face my brother alone."

Guest sprang into the carriage, the door was shut quickly, and the footman leaped to his place as the horses started forward with a loud trampling of hoofs, but not quickly enough to take them beyond the hearing of a derisive cheer.



## CHAPTER V.

### A BRAVE DEFENSE.

**T**HE hotel! The idiot! To want to take us back there to face the half-hidden mockery and jokes of all those strangers. Oh, it's maddening!"

Sir Mark leaned forward, lowered the front window, and shouted to the coachman to drive faster.

"I saw them," he continued as he flung himself back in his seat, "the whole mob in the church sniggling with delight. Curse them! And that fellow, Stratton! If ever we stand face to face again I'll—— Oh, I hope he will never have the audacity to come near me, for his own sake."

Myra had been sitting perfectly upright, looking as if suffering from some cataleptic seizure; but at the mention of Stratton she turned and laid her hand upon her father's arm.

"Oh, yes, of course!" he raged, with a mocking laugh. "Womanlike; a hundred excuses ready for him: cut himself in shaving—wedding clothes not home in time—sprained his ankle—a bad headache. Oh, you women, you women! If ever there were a pack of fools——"

"Father!"

That one word only, but full of so much agony that he turned and caught her to his breast.

"Brute! Senseless brute!" he literally growled. "Thinking of myself, of my own feelings, and not of you, my own."

Then raging again, with his countenance purple, and the veins of his temples starting:



"But you ! To insult you, my child, and after that other horrible affair. How a man—who professed to worship you—could subject you to such an outrage—to such infamy ! I tell you it is maddening."

"Father !" once more in a piteous tone.

"No ; you shall not plead for him, my darling. You have behaved nobly. Like a true, self-respecting English lady. No acting, no silly girlish fainting, but like my daughter. You must go on, though. This scoundrel must be shown that he cannot insult you with impunity."

"Listen, father," she whispered after a desperate effort to restrain the hysterical burst of agony striving for exit.

"I will not. There is no excuse, Myra. A telegram—a messenger—his friend and best man. Nothing done. The man is—no ; he is no man. I'll—my lawyer shall—no ; I'll go myself. He shall see that—— Silence ! Be firm. Don't move a muscle. Take my arm when I hand you out, and not a word till we are in the drawing room."

For the carriage had stopped, after a rapid course, at Sir Mark's house in Bourne Square, where they had to wait some minutes before, in response to several draggings at the bell, the door was opened by an elderly housemaid.

"Why was not this door answered ? Where is Andrews ?" thundered the admiral as the footman came in, looking startled, and closed the door behind which the housemaid stood, looking speechless at her master's unexpected return.

"Shall the carriage wait, Sir Mark ?" interposed the footman.

"No ! Stop ; don't open that door. I said, why was this door not answered ?

"I'm very sorry, Sir Mark," faltered the woman, who was trembling visibly. "I was upstairs cleaning myself."

"Bah ! Where is Andrews ? Where are the other servants ?"



"They all went to the wedding, Sir Mark."

"Bah !"

"Father—upstairs—I can bear no more," whispered Myra.

Brought back to his child's suffering, the admiral hurried her up to the drawing room and let her sink back on a couch. Then, turning to the bell, he was about to ring for help, but Myra rose.

"No ; don't ring," she said in a hoarse whisper. "I'm better now."

At that moment Miss Jerrold's carriage stopped at the door, and directly after Sir Mark's sister appeared with Edie, who, looking white and scared, ran at once to her cousin and clung to her, uttering violent sobs.

"Silence, Edie !" thundered the admiral. "Look at your cousin. You must be a woman now. Ah, here you are, then !" he continued fiercely as Percy Guest entered.

"Yes ; I came up for a moment before I go on there."

"I'm glad you've come," cried the old man furiously, and leaping at someone upon whom he could vent his rage. "Now, then, explain, you dog. What does that villain—that scoundrel—mean by insulting me—my child, like this ? Damn him ! I'll——"

"Stop, Sir Mark !" cried Guest firmly. "You don't know what you are saying."

"What ?"

"And I will not stand here and have my dear old friend and schoolfellow insulted by such words."

"Insulted !" cried Sir Mark, with a harsh laugh ; "insulted ?"

"Yes, sir. Malcolm Stratton is the soul of honor—a gentleman who would have laid down his life sooner than cause pain to the lady he loves with all his heart."

"God bless you for that, Mr. Guest !" cried Myra—catch-



ing the young man's hand as she spoke—in a broken voice, which she fought hard to render calm.

“Bah! Heroics! Come away, Myra. Of course he'll talk big for his friend. But where is he? Why has he insulted us all like this?”

“Heaven only knows, sir,” said Guest solemnly. “Forgive me for speaking as I do before you, Mrs. Barron, but at the cost of alarming you I must take Malcolm's part. I saw him this morning at his chambers, ready almost to come on. He placed Miss Perrin's telegram in my hands—about the bouquet—and begged me to see to it at once—to take the flowers to the hotel, and meet him at the church.”

“Yes—yes!” cried Myra eagerly, and her large, dark eyes were dilated strangely.

“I did not pay any heed to it then, for I attributed it to anxiety and nervous excitement.”

“What, Mr. Guest?” cried Myra piteously.

“His appearance, Mrs. Barron. There was a peculiar wild look in his eyes, and his manner was strange and excited. Some seizure must have been coming on.”

“Yes, yes; it is that,” said Myra hoarsely, and she hurriedly tore off gloves, veil, and ornaments.

“He was quite well last night,” said the admiral scornfully. “It was a trick to get rid of you. I'll never believe but what it is all some deeply laid plan.”

“You do not know what you are saying, Sir Mark, or I would resent your words. Mrs. Barron, I will come back directly I obtain tidings of my poor friend. You know him better than to think ill of him.”

“Yes, yes,” cried Myra, speaking firmly now, but in a low, hurried murmur. “But stop, Mr. Guest; stop!”

He turned sharply, for he was already at the door.

“Wait for me—only a few minutes. Edie—quick; help.”



Her cousin flew to her side.

"Myra!" cried the admiral fiercely; "what are you going to do?"

"Change my dress," she said with unnatural calmness. "Go to him."

"What?"

"Where should I be but at his side?"

"Impossible, girl! You shall not degrade yourself like this!" cried the admiral; and Miss Jerrold caught her niece's hands.

"There would be no degradation, Sir Mark," said Guest firmly; "but, Mrs. Barron, you cannot go. For years Malcolm has been like my brother. He had no secrets from me, and I can tell you from my heart that there is but one reason for his absence—a sudden seizure. Don't keep me, though, pray. Stay here and wait my return. Unless"—he added quickly, with a deprecating glance at Sir Mark.

"What! I—go with you to hunt up the man and beg him to come? Pshaw!"

"Mark, it is your duty to go," said his sister sternly. "I don't believe Mr. Stratton would insult us like this."

"Then for once in my life, madam, I will not do my duty!" cried the admiral furiously. "It is not the only occasion upon which a man has gained the confidence of his friends. It is not the first time I have been so cruelly deceived. I can see it plainly. Either, like a pusillanimous coward, he turned tail, or there is some disgraceful entanglement which holds him back!"

"Father, it is not true!" cried Myra angrily. "How dare you insult me like that?"

"I—insult you?"

"Yes, in the person of the man I love—my husband, but for this terrible mischance. You do not mean it; you are mad with anger, but you will go with Mr. Guest at once."

"Never!" roared the admiral.



"For my sake," she cried as she flung her arms about his neck and clung to him. "I give up—I will not attempt to go there myself—you are quite right; but," she murmured now, so that her words were almost inaudible to all but him for whom they were intended, "I love him, dear, and he is in pain and suffering. Go to him; I cannot bear it. Bring him to me, or I shall die."

The admiral kissed her hastily, and she clung to him for a moment or two longer as he drew a long, deep breath.

"My own dearest father," she whispered, and she would have sunk at his feet, but he gently placed her in a lounge chair and turned to Guest.

"Now, sir," he said, as if he were delivering an order from the quarter-deck, "I am at your service."

Myra sprang from her chair and caught her aunt's arm, looking wildly in her eyes; and the meaning of the look was grasped.

"Stop a moment, Mark," she said. "My carriage is waiting. You may want a woman there; I'll come with you."

"You?" cried her brother. "Absurd!"

"Not at all," said the lady firmly. "Mr. Guest, take me down to my carriage; I shall come."

Sir Mark frowned, but said no more; he merely glanced back as Myra now gave up and sank in her cousin's arms, while, as Miss Jerrold went down, her lips tightened, and she looked wonderfully like her brother, as she said to herself:

"Thank goodness! No man ever wanted to marry me."

"Benchers' Inn," said Guest sharply as the footman closed the carriage door, and the trio sat in silence, each forming a mental picture of that which they were going to see.



## CHAPTER VI.

### GUEST THINKS THE WORST.

"MYRA! My own darling!" sobbed Edie.

"Hush! No, I must talk. If I think in silence I shall go mad."

"O Myra, Myra, are you never to be really married after all?"

The bride made a hurried motion with her hands, then pressed them to her temples and thrust back her hair.

"It makes me think of two years ago, dear," whispered Edie, "and all the horrors of that day."

"Yes; is it fate?" said Myra hoarsely as she sat gazing at vacancy.

"But I'll never believe that Malcolm Stratton could do wrong," whispered Edie, caressing and trying to soothe the sufferer as she clung to her side. "It couldn't have been that this time, or else Percy would not be such friends."

Myra bent forward with her eyes dilated as if she were gazing at something across the room.

"Your poor hands are so cold and damp, and your forehead burning hot. O Myra, Myra! I did not think that two such terrible days could come in one poor girl's life."

"Edie," said Myra in a husky whisper, "you saw Malcolm last night?"

"Yes, dear, of course."

"You did not see anything strange in his manner?"

"No; only that he was half mad with joy, and when he kissed me and said good-night—you remember?"

"Yes, yes."



"He said he was the happiest man alive."

"Yes ; I remember the exact words."

"And he hoped that soon——"

Edie stopped with a faint flush in her cheeks.

Myra nodded quickly, but without ceasing to gaze straight away into vacancy.

"But there was nothing strange—he was quite well—he said nothing else to you?"

"No, dear ; nothing that I can recall."

"Are you sure he dropped no hint ? Nothing that could make you think he did not wish to marry me?"

"No, no, no, dear. He was longing to call you his very own. He said so — to me. But don't look like that, darling ; you frighten me. What are you thinking?"

Myra was silent, and her aspect was so strange that Edie shook her excitedly.

"Myra, darling—don't !" she cried.

"I was thinking was it possible that, after all, he could repent," said Myra in low, measured tones. "Whether, knowing all, he shrank from me at the moment when a few words would have made it irrevocable."

"But why—why, darling?" cried Edie in alarm.

"You cannot grasp it as he would. I—married, and under such circumstances. Love is blind, Edie, and he, poor fellow, may have been blinded in his love—his old love for me. But what if the veil dropped away from his eyes at last, and he could not, he dared not face it—the sacrifice for him ! Edie, it was that, and I forgive him, for I loved him with all my heart."

Startled by her cousin's looks and words, Edie now caught her hands and stood over her, speaking impetuously, almost angrily.

"For shame !" she cried. "Malcolm Stratton would never have acted like that. O Myra ; how could you



think it of him? So manly and open and frank in everything. Oh, no, no, no; it could not be that."

Myra turned to her quickly and clung to the hands which grasped hers, as if sinking in her despair, and clutching at one more chance for life.

"Say—say that again," she whispered huskily.

"I'll say it a hundred times, but there is no need. Malcolm could not treat you like this of his own free will. He must be—he is ill, and that is all."

"Is I could only think so," said Myra as if to herself. "If I could only believe it was that; but no, no," she wailed now, breaking down utterly, and snatching away her hands to cover her convulsed face; "the truth has been too strong at last, and he has gone."

"Myra!" cried Edie. "Hush! You shall not give way like this. How can you be so weak? It is madness. If he had treated you so shamefully, and turned away, you could not—you should not, take it to heart. Where is your woman's pride? To give way, believing such an infamy, is dreadful. But I tell you it isn't—it can't be true. There, there, be calm, my darling. Be patient till they come back. He has studied too hard lately—that's it. I've noticed how pale and worried he looked at times, and with this excitement—you heard what Percy said—he has broken down. There, that's the truth. He's ill, and will soon be better, and all will come right, Myra! my darling coz. Don't turn like that. Oh—help! help! help!"

She thrust her cousin back so that her head rested on the lounge, for a deathly look had come over the beautiful face, the eyes were half closed, sending a chill of horror through the startled girl, who now tore frantically at the bell.

"A doctor—they must fetch a doctor. No; Percy must come back to tell her the simple truth, for I am right: Malcolm Stratton could not treat her as she thinks."

And Percy Guest was on the way to put it to the test.



For some little distance not a word was spoken in the carriage, each of its occupants being full of his or her own thoughts.

Miss Jerrold was the first to break the silence. For, as she sat there stern and uncompromising, thinking of the duty she had voluntarily undertaken in answer to the appeal in her niece's eyes, which plainly asked that she would stand between father and lover in any encounter which might take place, she noted that she was still holding the bouquet of exotics she had borne to the church.

A look of annoyance and disgust crossed her face.

"Here, Mr. Guest," she said sharply; "let down the window and throw these stupid flowers away."

Guest started, and hesitated about taking the bouquet, but it was pressed into his hand, and he was about to lower the window when the lady interposed.

"No; it would be waste," she cried. "Wait till we see some poor flower girl, and give it to her."

The window on her right was let down sharply; then the flowers were snatched from her hand, and thrown out into the road by Sir Mark, who dragged the window up again with an angry frown.

"As you please, Mark," said the lady quietly; "but the flowers might have been worth shillings to some poor soul."

Silence reigned once more as the wheels spun round. Oxford Street was reached and crossed, the coachman turning down into and across Grosvenor Square, and then in and out, avoiding the main streets, till the last, when the busy thoroughfare was reached near its eastern end, and the carriage was drawn up at the narrow, court-like entrance to the quiet, secluded inn.

Heads were turned directly, among those whose attention was taken being a barrister in wig and gown, just on his



way to the court, where Mr. Justice Blank was giving his attention to a divorce case.

Miss Jerrold saw the legal gentleman's smile, and guessed its meaning.

"How stupid!" she muttered. Then, as the footman came to the door: "Edward," she whispered hurriedly, "take that stupid satin bow from your breast. Tell Johnson, too."

The favor disappeared as the door was thrown open, and Sir Mark sprang out to go straight on toward the inn; then, recollecting himself, he turned to help his sister alight.

But he was too late. Percy Guest had performed that duty, and the lady took his arm and followed the admiral on into the calm silence of the old inn, past the porter's lodge, unnoticed by its occupant; then on across the square, under its shady plane trees, toward the fine old red brick mansion in the corner, with its iron lamp support and curious old link extinguishers on either side.

The place was utterly deserted, and so still that the creaking of the admiral's new boots sounded loud and strange, while as they mounted the worn steps and entered the gloomy hall of the old place it struck chilly and damp, while the great stone staircase had a look that seemed forbidding and strange.

"You have brought us here," said Sir Mark, stopping short at the foot of the stairs. "Go first."

He gave place to Guest, who led Miss Jerrold on and up the two flights to the broad landing, upon which the doors of Brettison's and Stratton's chambers opened.

"One moment while I get my breath," panted Miss Jerrold; "I'm not so young as I used to be, Mr. Guest."

The admiral frowned, and stood scowling at the legend on the door, but it seemed cold and blank now, for there was no ray of sunshine to make the letters stand out clear.



All looked murky and grim, and the utter silence of the place was impressive as that of a tomb.

As they stood there on the landing Guest hesitated for a moment or two, an undefinable feeling of dread having attacked him ; there was a curious ringing in the ears, and his heart beat with a heavy throb.

He was brought back to his duty by the cold, stern voice of the admiral.

"Well, Mr. Guest," he said again with a cold formality of tone, "you have brought us here"—and he waved his hand toward the door.

Guest sprang forward, knocked sharply, and stood back to wait, while Miss Jerrold drew a long, hissing breath, perfectly audible in the silence.

There was no response, and the chirping of the inn sparrows came painfully loud through an open window somewhere above.

"What a dismal place for a man to choose," muttered Miss Jerrold. "Had you not better knock again?"

Guest repeated the summons, and the admiral leaned forward, listening attentively.

Still there was no reply ; and, growing agitated now, Guest once more knocked loudly, with the repetition of the knocker, telling plainly of the trembling hand of him who raised it and let it fall.

He drew back, to stand listening intently till Miss Jerrold spoke.

"He must be out," said the lady quietly. "Knock again, Mr. Guest."

The knocker once more raised the echoes of the weird-looking old staircase, and then died out above with a peculiar whisper, while Guest's heart sank within his breast as a dozen fancies now took possession of him, and horror prevailed.

"We cannot stay here," said Miss Jerrold. "Mr. Guest,



will you see me to my carriage again? Mr. Stratton must be out. Gone to Bourne Square, and we have passed him on the way."

"No!" thundered the admiral; "he is within there, hiding, like the cur he is, and afraid to face me!"

Guest turned upon him angrily.

"Come away, sister," growled the old man; "I am right."

"No, sir; I swear you are wrong," cried Guest.

"What? Why, I saw the change in your face, man, when I heard a rustling noise in there. You heard it too. Deny it if you can."

Guest was silent for a moment, and he stood with his eyes fixed upon the letter box, as if expecting to see the cover of the slit move.

"I am not going to deny it, sir; I did hear a sound," he said. "If he is here he shall come out and face you, and tell the truth and reason of his absence. It is illness, I am sure."

As he spoke he once more seized the knocker and beat out a heavy *roulade*.

But still there was no reply, and, taking his sister's hand, the admiral drew it through his arm.

"Illness?" he said in a low growl. "Yes, the shivering fit of a coward or a cur."

"It is not true!" cried Guest excitedly as a thought flashed across his brain. "I remember now: he had a heavy sum of money on the table when I was here, and——Great Heavens! is it that?"

His manner was contagious, and his face conveyed his terrible thoughts to his companions.

Miss Jerrold clung to her brother, and turned ghastly pale, while a look of horror contracted the old man's face.

"You—you don't think——" he stammered.

"I think the worst, or my poor friend would have been with us."



“Man—for God’s sake don’t say that,” gasped the admiral, as Guest stepped back to the full extent of the landing.

“There is some mystery here.”

“Stop! What are you going to do?” cried Sir Mark, catching at his arm.

“Stand aside, sir; I am going to burst open that door.”



## CHAPTER VII.

### TWO YEARS BEFORE.

**B**LUE sky, the bluest of blue water, margined with green and gold ; gloriously rugged, steeply sloping pasture alps, dotted with picturesquely carved chalets, weatherworn by sun and rain to a rich, warm brown ; higher up, the *sehn hütte*—the summer farmsteads of the peasants, round and about which graze gentle, soft-faced cows, each bearing its sweet-toned, musical bell. Again, higher still, gray crag and lightning-blasted granite, bare, repellant, and strange ; upward still, and in nook and cranny patches of a dingy white, like the sweepings up of a great hailstorm ; another thousand feet up, and the aching eyes dazzled by peak, fold, cushion, and plain of white—the eternal ice ; and, above all, the glorious sun beaming down, melting from the snows a million tiny rivers, which whisper and sing as they carve channels for their courses and meet and coalesce to flow amicably down, or quarrel and rage and rush together, till, with a mighty, echoing roar, they plunge headlong down the rift in some mighty glacier, flow on for miles, and reappear at the foot turbid, milky, and laden with stone, to hurry headlong to their purification in the lovely lake below.

Two hundred feet above that lake, on a broad shelf, stood the *Hotel des Cerfs*, a magnified chalet, and in the wooden balcony, leaning upon the carved rail, and gazing at the wondrous view across lake and meadow, up and away to the snow-covered mountains till they blended with the fleecy clouds, stood Myra Jerrold and Edie Perrin—



cousins by birth, sisters by habit—reveling in their first visit to the land of ice peak, valley, and lake.

“I could stand here, I think, forever, and never tire of drinking in the beauties of such a scene, Edie. It makes me so happy; and yet there are moments when the tears come into my eyes, and I feel sad.”

“Yes, I know, dear,” replied Edie. “That’s when you want your lunch or dinner. One feels faint.”

“How can you be so absurd?” cried Myra half reproachfully.

“Then it’s indigestion, from eating old goat.”

“Edie!”

“It is, dear,” said the merry, fair-haired girl, swinging her straw hat by one string over the balcony. “I’m sure they save up the goats when they’re too old to give any milk, to cook up for the visitors, and then they call it chamois. I wish Aunt Jerrold had been here to have some of that dish last night. I say, she wants to know when we are coming back to Bourne Square.”

“I don’t know,” said Myra thoughtfully. “I am in no hurry. It is very beautiful here.”

“Hum, yes. You like it—as well as St Malo, the boating, and that quaint Breton woman where we lodged?”

“Of course. The flowers and the pine woods—it is one glorious garden. Papa liked the yachting, though.”

“Yes; but after three months out here I shall be glad to see smoky old London again.”

“Yes,” said Myra meaningly, “I suppose so.”

Edie glanced at her sidewise in a quick, sharp way, but was silent for a few minutes. When her cousin spoke:

“Let’s go and coax papa out for a good ramble till dinner—I mean supper time.”

“No good; he would not come. Piquet, coffee, and cigars. Do you like this Mr. Barron, Myra?”



"Oh, yes, well enough. He is very clever and well informed. He can talk pleasantly about anything, especially about yachting and the sea, and of course papa likes that."

"Talks too much, I think. I'd rather sit and listen to quiet, thoughtful Mr. Stratton."

"I suppose so," said Myra rather dryly; and then hastened to add, "and Mr. Guest."

"Yes, and to Mr. Guest," said her cousin, again looking at her sharply, and as if the words had stung.

Myra met her glance, and hurriedly changed the conversation.

"Look, what a change there is on the lake, dear," she said. "How glowing the water is."

"Yes, and yet some people prefer playing cards to studying nature."

"Papa is no longer young. He has enjoyed scenery all over the world and likes rest now, and a game of cards."

"I was not talking about uncle, dear."

"About Mr. Barron, then? Dear me, what a sagacious nod. Edie dear, don't think out romances. Let's enjoy the matter of fact and real. Ready for a walk?"

Edie held up her hat by one string, and put it on ready to descend with her cousin to a lower balcony, on another frontage of the house, where, seated at a table, with coffee, cigars, and a pack of cards, was the admiral, and, facing him, a rather heavily built man, with some pretensions to being handsome. He was plainly and well dressed, of the easy manners of one accustomed to all kinds of society, and apparently rather proud of his white, carefully tended hands.

As he turned a little more to the light in bending to remove the ash from his cigar, streaks of gray showed in his closely cut beard and crisp, dark hair. In addition there was a suggestion of wrinkling about the corners and



beneath his eyes, the work more of an arduous life than age.

As he rose to replace the cigar between his lips he smiled carelessly.

"Luck's with you to-day, admiral," he said ; and he was in the act of shuffling his cards when he caught sight of his companion's daughter and niece.

In an instant the cards were thrown down, and the cigar jerked out of the window.

"What's the matter?" said the admiral. "Ah, girls!"

"We're come to ask you to go for a walk with us, papa, but if——"

Myra's eyes rested for a moment on the admiral's companion, and then dropped to the cards.

"Our game?" said the younger man quickly. "Oh, that's nothing ; we can play any time, Miss Jerrold, and the weather is lovely now. Why not accompany the ladies, sir?"

"No, thanks ; I get more walking than I care for. Don't go far, girls ; the mountains are full of goblins and dragons, which devour pretty maidens. Be back soon, and I'll go and sit down with you by the lake. Now, Barron, your deal."

The gentleman addressed looked at the ladies, and shrugged his shoulders slightly as much as to say, "You see I have no alternative."

"Then you will not come, papa?" said Myra as she rested her hands on his shoulders.

"No, my dear ; too tired. Don't spoil my luck by stopping ; run along."

"Uncle talks to us as if we were two little tots of things, Myry," said Edie as they crossed the hotel garden.

"Well, why should we not always be to him like the girls he loves and pets?"

James Barron thought the same as Edie as he dealt the



cards, and he added to himself : " She resents it ; I could see her brow wrinkle. That settles it ; I'll chance the throw."

" Ha ! Now we can be at peace again," cried the admiral as he settled himself to his hand, which he played out, and ended by winning the game.

James Barron took up the pack again nervously, threw it down, thrust his hand into his pocket, and then passed a couple of louis across the table.

" Cut," said the admiral.

His *vis-à-vis* shook his head, took out a case, and carefully selected a cigar, which he proceeded to cut and light.

" Oh, nonsense, man ! The luck will change ; my turn to-day, your's to-morrow."

" Pooh ! It isn't that, Sir Mark," said Barron, throwing himself back in his chair. " I can afford to lose a few louis. I'm a bit hipped—out of sorts."

" Hotel living."

" No, sir ; brain. There, I'll speak plainly, even at the risk of your laughing at me, for we have been friends now at several places during the last three months—since I met you at St. Malo."

" Pleasant acquaintances, sir," said the admiral, metaphorically drawing himself beneath the shell of his English reserve. " Mutual tastes—yachting. Acquaintances, sir."

" I beg your pardon ; acquaintances, then."

There was a pause, during which the admiral also lit a fresh cigar, and his brows twitched a little.

" Sir Mark, I'm a plain man, and I think by this time you pretty well know my history. I ought to be over in Trinidad superintending the cocoa estate my poor father left me, but I detest the West Indies, and I love European life. It is my misfortune to be too well off. Not rich, but I have a comfortable, modest income. Naturally idle, I suppose."



"Nonsense, sir!" said the admiral gruffly. "One of the most active men I ever met."

"Thank you. Well, idle, according to the accepted ideas of some of the Americans we meet abroad. Dollars—making dollars—their whole conversation chinks of the confounded coin, and their ladies' dresses rustle with greenbacks. I hate money-making, but I like money for my slave, which bears me into good society and among the beauties of nature. Yes, I am an idler—full, perhaps, of dilettantism."

"Rather a long preface, Mr. Barron," said Sir Mark gruffly. "Make headway, please. What is it you wish to say?"

"I think you know, sir," said the other warmly. "I lived to thirty-seven, hardly giving a thought to the other sex, save as agreeable companions. I met you and your niece and daughter over yonder at Macugnaga, and the whole world was changed."

"Humph!"

"I am not a boy, sir. I speak to you as a man of the world, and I tell you plainly that I love her as a strong man only can love."

"Edith?"

"Don't trifle with me, sir!" cried Barron, bringing his hand down heavily upon the table, and gazing almost fiercely in the old sailor's eyes.

"Humph! my daughter, then. And you have told her all this?"

"Sir Mark Jerrold! Have I ever given you cause to think I was other than a gentleman?"

"No, no," said the admiral hastily. "I beg your pardon. But this is all very sudden; we are such new acquaintances."

"You might call it friends," said Barron reproachfully.

"No; acquaintances—yet," said the old sailor sturdily.



"Then you do give me some hope?" cried Barron excitedly.

"No, I did not, sir. I'm out of soundings here. No; hang it, I meant to say, sir, in shoal water. Hang it, man, I don't want the child to think about such things for years."

"Sir Mark, your daughter must be twenty."

"Eh? Twenty? Humph! Well, I suppose she is."

"There is no hurry, sir. Let matters go on as they are, only let it be an understood thing that you do, say in a latent way, encourage my suit."

"No, sir; I'll bind myself to nothing; I—— Oh, hang it all, man, why did you spoil a pleasant trip like this?"

"Spoil it, Sir Mark? Have some compassion for the natural feelings of a man thrown into the society of so sweet a girl as——"

"That will do, sir; that will do," cried the admiral, frowning. "There; I'm not going to quarrel with you, Mr. Barron. I was young once myself. I was a good sailor, I'm told, but this sort of thing is out of my latitude. If my poor wife had lived—— Phew! it's growing hot, isn't it? Thunderstorm, I suppose."

"I'm very sorry, Sir Mark."

"So am I, sir," said the admiral. "There's an end to our trip."

"Sir Mark! Don't talk like that. I'll leave the hotel to-morrow. I would not on any consideration——"

"That will do, Mr. Barron; that will do. I'm a man of few words, and what I say I mean. This can go no further here."

"You don't mean that you will go away?"

"Back to England, sir, and home as fast as I can."

"But my proposal, sir?"

"I have a sister there, sir, my counselor in all matters concerning my two girls."



"But you will give me leave to call—in England?"

"Tchah, man! You'll forget it all in a month."

Barron smiled.

"You will give me leave to call at your house?"

"As a gentleman, sir, I can hardly refuse that."

Barron smiled and bowed.

"I see, sir. I have been too hasty, Admiral Jerrold. I ask you as a favor, if you do carry out your hasty decision, to make some inquiries respecting Mr. Barron of Trinidad."

"I shall, sir, of course," said the admiral. "You'll excuse me now; I'm going to join my niece and daughter."

He left the veranda gallery, puffing heavily at his cigar, while Barron stood watching him.

"Hit or miss?" he muttered. "Hit, I think, and game worth bringing down. She's cold. Well, naturally, I don't think I managed it so badly, after all."

"Oh, here's uncle," said Edie half an hour later as she saw the big, burly figure of the old sailor approaching. "Oh, you dear, good old uncle. Come and sit down here, and you can see the color changing on the ice peaks."

"No, no, no. Come back, girls, and pack up. We're off by the first train to-morrow."

"Where to now, papa?"

"Bourne Square, W., my dear, as soon as we can get there. Come along!"

"Myry—Mr. Barron passed as we came into the hotel, and only raised his hat."

"Have papa and he had some misunderstanding over the cards?"

"Perhaps: over the hearts."

"Edie!" cried Myra, coloring. "What do you mean?"

"He has been proposing for you, and uncle said no; and now he is going to carry us off home to be safe."



“Proposed for me,” said Myra thoughtfully, and in the most unruffled way, as her eyes assumed a dreamy, wondering look.

“Of course, and you love him dearly, don’t you?”

“I? Oh, no,” said Myra calmly.

“What a strange girl she is!” thought Edith that night as she went to bed.

And Myra said to herself again calmly and thoughtfully: “Proposed for me. Perhaps Edie is right. But how strange!”



## CHAPTER VIII.

### STRATTON'S DECISION.

“YES, sir, it's done,” said Mrs. Brade, looking sadly in at the doorway on the left side of the fire ; “and I hope it will turn out all right, but my experience of pipes is that they always busties in the winter, and drowns all your neighbors out on the next floor.”

“Well, I hope this will be an exception,” said Stratton, laughing.

“I hope so, too, sir, but it's no laughing matter, and for my part—though, of course, gentlemen have a right to do as they like—I think there is nothing like a big, flat, zinc bath painted oak out, and white in, set on a piece of oil-cloth in a gentleman's bedroom. Then you've your big sponge, and a can of water. No trouble about them getting out of order.”

“But the trouble, Mrs. Brade,” said Stratton. “No filling ; no anything.”

“No, sir, of course not ; but you're always at the mercy of the plumbers ; and if these men don't always leave their work so that it'll make another job before long, I'm not a Christian woman.”

“Oh, you object to it because it's new-fashioned,” said Stratton merrily.

“Which, begging your pardon, I don't, sir. What I do object to is your taking up a beautiful closet to make into a bath room ; and out of your sitting room, and none too much cupboard room before. If it had been a cupboard in your bedroom I shouldn't have said a word.”



“ But there was no cupboard there, Mrs. Brade, and that closet fitted exactly, so say no more about it.”

“ Certainly not, sir, if you don't wish it ; and only too glad am I to have got rid of the workmen ; though as I lay in bed last night I said to my husband, ‘ Mark my word, John, if Mr. Brettison don't go having a bath made in his room, for there's the fellow-closet as matches Mr. Stratton's exactly.’ ”

“ To be sure, I never thought of that,” said Stratton merrily. “ I'll give him a hint.”

“ Mr. Stratton, sir, if you've any respect for me and my rheumatism, don't. The place smells horrid as it is of paint, and French polish, and plumbers, without counting the mess they made, and if you'll be guided by me you'll buy a sixpenny box of pastilles and let me burn one every day till the smell of workmen's gone.”

“ Oh, I don't mind the smell, Mrs. Brade. By George, yes, Mr. Brettison ought to have a bath put in his.”

“ Mr. Stratton, sir, don't, please. He's sure to if you say a word ; and if the workmen come again we shall be having the whole place tumbling about our ears.”

“ I hope not. Oh, the old place is strong enough.”

“ I don't know, sir,” said the porter's wife, shaking her head ; “ it's a very old and tumble-down sort of place, and I've heard noises, and crackings, and rappings, sometimes, as have made my flesh creep. They do say the place is haunted.”

“ With rats ? ”

“ Worse, sir. Oh, I'm told there were strange goings on here in the old times, when a Lord Morran lived here. I've heard that your cupboard——”

“ Bath room.”

“ Well, sir, bath room, was once a passage into Mr. Brettison's chambers, and his closet was a passage into yours, and they used to have dinners, and feasts, and dancing, and



masked balls, at which they used to play dominoes. The gambling and goings on was shameful. But please, sir, don't say a word to Mr. Brettison. I've trouble enough with him now. There never was such a gentleman for objecting to being dusted, and the way those big books of his that he presses his bits of chickweed and groundsel in do hold the dust is awful. If you wished to do him some kindness you'd get him away for a bit, so that I could turn his rooms inside out. Postman, sir."

Mrs. Brade hurried to the outer door and fetched a letter just dropped into the box, and upon this being eagerly taken, and opened, she saw that there was no further chance of being allowed to gossip, and saying "Good-morning, sir," she went out, and down to the porter's lodge.

Malcolm Stratton's hands trembled as he turned the letter over and hesitated to open it.

"What a manly hand the old lady writes, and how fond she is of sporting their arms," he continued, as he held up the great blot of red wax carefully sealed over the adhesive flap of the envelope.

Then tearing it open he read :

WESTBOURNE TERRACE, Thursday.

MY DEAR MR. STRATTON :

Thank you for your note and its news. Accept my congratulations. You certainly deserved to gain the post ; the work will be most congenial, and it will give you an opportunity for carrying on your studies, besides placing you in the independent position for which you have worked so long and hard. I wish my dear old friend and schoolfellow, your mother, had lived to see her boy's success. You must go on now with renewed confidence, and double that success.

Very sincerely yours,

REBECCA JERROLD.

Malcolm Stratton, Esq.

P. S.—I shall be at home to-morrow evening. Come and see me, and bring your friend. Nobody will be here but the girls, who are going to give me a little music, as my brother dines out.



Stratton's face flushed warmly, and he stood staring before him at the window.

"I could not go there now," he muttered, "without seeing the old man first. It would not be honorable. I meant to wait, but—— I must speak at once."

He re-read the letter, and his eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"And I asked her point blank, and she does not even refer to it. Then it was her doing. God bless her! She has been using her interest and working for me. It's her work, and she must approve of it."

He hurriedly thrust the letter into his breast as a double rap came at his door, and, upon opening it, Percy Guest came in.

"Got your wire, old chap, and came on at once. Something the matter?"

"Yes; something serious."

"My dear old man, I'm so sorry. Want help—money? Don't keep me in suspense."

"No, old fellow," cried Stratton proudly; "the news came this morning, and I telegraphed to you directly."

"Not——"

"Yes, I am the successor of poor old Professor Raymond—the new curator of the Headley Museum."

"Hurray!" cried Guest, snatching up a great bird-skin by the beak and waving it round his head till he wrung its neck right off. "Oh, bother! Three cheers for Professor Stratton! Bravo! Why, you'll be an awful scientific swell. Malcolm, old chap, I am glad," he continued, flinging the choice and valuable specimen up on to a bookcase, and grasping his friend's hand. "You shall dine with me to-night, and we'll pour out champagne libations to the gods."

"Sit down and be quiet," said Stratton gravely. "No,



old fellow, I can't dine with you to-night; I've something particular to do."

"Come and have a big lunch, then; we must go mad somehow. Why, its glorious, old man! They've had big, scientific, bald-headed old buffers there before—regular old dry-as-dusts. Come on; you can't and I can't work to-day."

"Sit down, I tell you, and be serious. I want to talk to you."

"All right—I may smoke?"

"Smoke? Yes."

"But are you sure you can't come?" said Guest, taking out a pipe.

"Quite. I have made up my mind to go to Bourne Square to-night."

"To the admiral's?" cried Guest, starting, and changing color a little.

"Yes; there is an invitation just come for me to go to Miss Jerrold's to-morrow night and take you."

"Indeed!" said Guest eagerly.

"She says in a postscript that the ladies will be there."

"Well?" said Guest uneasily, and beginning to smoke very hard.

"Don't you understand?"

"Eh? No."

"Then I must speak plainly, old fellow. For a year before they went out to Switzerland we were there a great deal, and met them after."

Guest nodded and his pipe did not seem to draw.

"We have met them often during these three months that they have been back."

Guest laughed and struck a match. His pipe was out.



"Well, have you not seen anything?"

"Yes," said Guest huskily.

"I felt that you must have seen it, old fellow. I have no secrets from you. I have loved her from the first time I saw her at Miss Jerrold's, and it has gone on growing till at times I have been almost in despair. For how could I speak, poor and hard up as I was—just a student, earning two or three hundred a year?"

"Always seemed attentive enough," said Guest, looking away as his friend paced the room with growing excitement.

"Perhaps; but I have schooled myself to hide it all, and to act as a gentleman should toward Sir Mark. It would have been dishonorable to act otherwise than as an ordinary friend of the family."

"I suppose so," said Guest dismally. "And now?"

"My position is changed. Poverty does not bar the way, and, feeling this, I cannot trust myself. I cannot go and meet her to-morrow evening at her aunt's without seeing the admiral first, and speaking out to him like a man."

"And—and—you really—care for her so much, old fellow?" said Guest hoarsely, and still in trouble with his pipe, which refused to draw.

"Care for her—so much!" exclaimed Stratton, flushing.

"And she?"

"How can I tell? I can only hope. I think she—no, it sounds presumptuous, but I must tempt my fate."

"And if the lady——"

"Refuses me—the admiral does not approve?"

"Yes. What then?"

"I must try and bear it like a man."

There was a few minutes' silence, though it only seemed a moment, when Guest spoke again in a curiously changed tone of voice.



"But about that Mr. Barron, Stratton?"

"Yes; what about him?"

"He is a good deal at Sir Mark's, isn't he?"

"Yes; a friend the old gentleman picked up abroad—yachting, I think."

"You don't think that he has any intentions?"

"That Mr. Barron? No; such an idea never crossed my mind. Absurd! He is quite a middle-aged man, I hear; I've not seen him. He is no favorite either of old Miss Jerrold. But what's the matter? Going?"

"Eh? Yes, I'm going now. You won't come out, old fellow, and I thought we'd put off the congratulatory dinner till another day."

"Yes, we will. I'm awfully sorry, Percy; don't take it ill of me."

"No, no; of course not."

"And—and I'll communicate with you about to-morrow night. Though, if I don't go, that is no reason why you should not."

"No, of course—that is——," faltered Guest, looking at his friend strangely. "Good-by, old fellow. You are going to the admiral's to-night?"

"No, I'll go this afternoon. He may be off out to dinner. Wish me luck, old fellow."

"Yes," said Guest slowly, "I wish you luck. I was afraid so," he said slowly, as he descended the stairs, looking careworn and wretched. "I ought to have known better. They were always together, and she likes him. Oh! I could break his neck. No, I couldn't. I'm only a fool, I suppose, for liking him. I've always been as if I was her dog. One's own and only friend to come between. Oh, what a crooked world it is! Round? Bosh! It's no shape at all, or it would have been evenly balanced and fair. Good-by, little Edie; you'll jump at him, of course."



He's worth half a dozen of such poor, weak-minded beggars as I am ; but I loved you very dearly indeed, indeed. I shan't go and make a hole in the water, little one, all the same. I wonder, though, whether an enterprising young barrister would have any chance in Fiji or the Caroline Isles ? I'll ask someone who knows."

Percy Guest went back to his chambers in Gray's Inn, and about half-past three a cab set down Malcolm Stratton at the admiral's door.



## CHAPTER IX.

“TOO LATE !”

“SIR MARK at home, Andrews?” said Stratton as the door was opened by the butler.

“Yes, sir. Mr. Barron’s with him, but of course he’ll see you. Will you step up in the drawing room? Only the young ladies there.”

“No, thanks,” said Stratton hurriedly. “Ask Sir Mark if he will see me or make some appointment. Where is he?”

“In the library, sir.”

“Mr. Barron with him,” thought Stratton as the butler showed him into the dining room and closed the door. “Wonder what he is like. Oh! impossible. How easily a man can be jealous.”

As he stood looking up at the portrait of a lady—Myra’s mother—he fancied he heard steps in the hall, and directly after the butler entered.

“Sir Mark will see you, sir,” said the butler.

“But Mr. Barron is there?”

“No, sir, just gone up to join the ladies.”

Stratton winced, and the next moment was shown into the library.

“Ah, Malcolm Stratton,” cried the admiral bluntly. “Come in, my dear boy. How are you? Glad you’ve called. My friend Mr. Barron was here. I wanted to introduce you two. Traveled much, but he’s chary of making new friends. You’ll like him, though, I’m sure. Wonderful fellow at the management of a yacht, and a magnificent



swimmer. Why, I believe that man, sir, could swim for miles."

"Indeed, Sir Mark."

"Oh, yes; but sit down, Stratton; you are quite a stranger. Want to see me on business?"

"Yes; I——"

But before he could get any further the admiral, who seemed in high spirits, interrupted him.

"Pity you were not ten minutes sooner. Barron was telling me a most amusing story of slave life in Trinidad in the old days. Wonderful fund of anecdote. But you said business or an appointment, my dear boy. Bad man to come to unless it's about the sea. What is it?"

Stratton made no answer for a few moments. The difficulty was how to begin. It was not that he was strange with the admiral, for, consequent upon the friendship formerly existing between Miss Jerrold and his mother, Sir Mark's house had been open to him times enough. Seeing his hesitation the old sailor smiled encouragement.

"Come, my lad," he said, "out with it. Is something wrong? Want help?"

"Yes, sir, yours," said Stratton, making his plunge, and now speaking quickly. "The fact is, Sir Mark, I have had news this morning—glorious news for me."

"Glad of it, my dear boy. But you looked just now as if you were going to court-martial for running your ship aground."

"I suppose it was natural, sir. Yesterday I was a poor struggling man, to-day I have had the letter announcing my appointment to the Headley Museum, and it is not only the stipend—a liberal one—but the position that is so valuable for one who is fighting to make his way in the scientific ranks."

The admiral stretched out his hand, and shook Stratton's warmly.



"Glad of it, my dear boy. My congratulations on your promotion. I shall see you an admiral among the scientific bigwigs yet. To be sure ; of course. I have been so taken up with other things—being abroad—and so much worried and occupied since I came back, that I had forgotten all about it. But my sister told me she was moving heaven and earth, and going down on her knees to all kinds of great guns to beg them to salute you."

"Then it has been her doing," cried Stratton excitedly.

"Oh, yes ; I think she has done something in it. Do the girls know?"

"No, sir ; not yet," said Stratton hastily. "I felt that it was my duty to come to you first."

"Eh ? Very good of you, I'm sure. I'll send for them. They'll be delighted."

He rose to ring, but Stratton interposed.

"Not yet, sir, please," he cried ; "I have something else to say."

"Wants to borrow a hundred for his outfit," thought the admiral. "Well, I like the fellow ; he shall have it. Now, my lad," he said aloud as he resumed his seat. "What is it ?"

Stratton hesitated for a few moments, and then hurriedly :

"I have met Miss Myra Jerrold and Miss Perrin frequently at their aunt's, Sir Mark, and to a great extent you have made me free of your house. You will grant, I hope, that feelings such as have grown up in me were quite natural. It was impossible for me to be in their society without forming an attachment, but I give you my word, sir, as a man, that never by word or look have I trespassed upon the kindness you have accorded me ; and had I remained poor, as I believed myself yesterday, I should never have uttered a word."



"Humph!" ejaculated the admiral, gazing at him sternly.

"But now that I do know my position, my first step is to come to you and explain."

"And the young lady? You have not spoken to her on the subject?"

"Never, Sir Mark, I swear."

"A gentleman's word is enough, sir. Well, I will not profess ignorance. My sister did once drop me a kind of hint about my duties, and I have noticed a little thing now and then."

"You have noticed, sir?" cried Stratton, looking startled.

"Oh, yes," said the admiral, smiling. "I'm not an observant man over such matters; in fact, I woke up only three months ago to find how blind I could be; but in your case I did have a few suspicions; for you young men are very transparent."

"Really, Sir Mark, I assure you," faltered Stratton, "I have been most guarded."

"Of course you have, my lad. Well, I am a poor pilot in love matters, but I don't see here why we should not go straight ahead. You are both young and suitable for each other. Rebecca swears by you, and I confess that I rather like you when you are not so confoundedly learned."

"Sir Mark!" cried Stratton, his voice husky with emotion, "in my wildest moments I never thought——"

"That I should be such an easy-going fellow, eh? But we are running too fast, boy. There is the young lady to think about."

"Of course—of course, sir."

"Not the custom to consult the ship about her captain, but we will here," cried Sir Mark with a laugh; "they generally appoint the captain right off. We'll have her down, bless her. A good girl, Stratton, and I congratulate you."



"But one moment, sir," faltered the young man; "is it kind—so suddenly—give me leave to speak to her first."

"No," said the old sailor abruptly; "she shall come down, and it shall be *yes* or *no* right off."

He rang the bell sharply, and then crossed back to Stratton, and shook his hand again.

"You've behaved very well indeed, my lad," he said; "and I like you for it. I never knew your father, but he must have been a gentleman. Your mother, Becky's friend, was as sweet a lady as I ever met."

The butler entered.

"Mr. Barron gone?"

"No, Sir Mark."

"Don't matter. Go and ask Miss Perrin to step down here."

The butler bowed, and left the room.

Stratton started from his seat with his face ghastly.

"Hullo, my lad! what's the matter? Time for action, and afraid to meet that saucy little thing. I say, you scientific fellows make poor lovers. Hold up, man, or she'll laugh at you."

"Sir Mark!" gasped Stratton. "Ring again—a horrible mistake on your part."

"What the deuce do you mean, sir? You come and propose for my niece's hand——"

"No; no, Sir Mark," cried the young man wildly.

"What! Why I've seen you attentive to her a score of times. I say again, what the deuce do you mean? Why—why—you were not talking about my own child?"

"My words all related to Miss Jerrold, Sir Mark," said Stratton, now speaking in a voice full of despair. "I never imagined that you could possibly misunderstand me."

"But, confound you, I did, sir. What the devil do you mean by blundering out such a lame tale as that?"



"Want me, uncle dear?" said Edie, entering the room.

"No, no, my dear. Run along upstairs. You're not wanted. I have business with Mr. Stratton here."

Edie darted a frightened glance from the choleric, flushed countenance of her uncle to Stratton's, which was almost white.

"Oh, poor Mr. Stratton," she thought as she drew back. "Then he did not know before."

The door closed, and Sir Mark turned upon Stratton fiercely.

"Why, confound you, sir!" he began; but the despairing face before him was disarming. "No, no," he cried, calming down; "no use to get in a passion about it. Poor lad! poor lad!" he muttered. Then aloud: "You were speaking, then, of Myra—my daughter—all the time?"

"Yes." Only that word in a despondent tone, for he could read rejection in every line of the old sailor's face.

"But I always thought—oh, what a confounded angle. This is not men's work. Why isn't Rebecca here? Mr. Stratton, this is all a horrible blunder. Surely Myra—my daughter—never encouraged you to hope?"

"Never, sir; but I did hope and believe. Let me see her, Sir Mark. I thought I was explicit, but we have been playing at cross purposes. Yes; ask Miss Jerrold to see me here—in your presence. Surely it is not too late to remedy such a terrible mistake."

"But it is too late, Mr. Stratton; and really I don't think I could ever have agreed to such an engagement, even if my child had been willing."

"Sir Mark!" pleaded Stratton.

"For Heaven's sake, let's bring it to an end, sir. I never imagined such a thing. Why, man, then all the time you were making friends with one cousin, so as to get her on your side."



" I don't know—was I ? " said Stratton dejectedly.

" Of course, sir. Acting the timid lover with the old result! " cried Sir Mark angrily.

Stratton gazed excitedly in his face ; there was so much meaning in his words.

" There," continued the admiral ; " out it must come, sir, and you must bear it like a man. My child, Myra, has accepted my friend Mr. Barron, and the marriage is to take place almost at once."

Stratton stood for a few moments gazing in Sir Mark's face, as if he failed to grasp the full tenor of his words. Then, turning slowly, and without a word, he left the room, walked back to his quaint, paneled chambers, and hid his despair from the eyes of man.



## CHAPTER X.

### AN UNOPENED BUD.

**M**YRA JERROLD stood looking very calm and statuesque, with James Barron holding her hand.

"Yes," he said, "I am going now, but only for a few hours. I cannot live away from you. Only a fortnight now, Myra, and then good-by to cold England. I take you to a land of beauty, of sunny skies, and joy and love."

"Can any land be as beautiful as that which holds one's home?" she said.

"No," replied Barron quickly, "but that will be your home."

"Trinidad," said Myra thoughtfully; "so many thousand miles away."

"Bah! what are a few thousand miles now? A journey in a floating hotel to a place where you can telegraph to your father's door—instantaneous messages, and receive back the replies.

"But still so far," said Myra dreamily.

"Try and drive away such thoughts, dearest," whispered Barron. "I shall be there. And besides, Sir Mark will run over and see us; and Edith, too, with her husband."

Myra's manner changed. The dreaminess passed away and she looked quickly in her betrothed's eyes.

"Yes, I always thought so," he said merrily. "'Tis love that makes the world go round. That Mr. Stratton, your old friend, is below. Don't you understand?"

"No," said Myra quietly, "not quite."



"I think you do, dearest," he said, trying to pass his arm round her, but she shrank gently away.

"Very well," he said, kissing her hand, "I can wait. You will not always be so cold. Mr. Stratton came to see your father on business, looking the lover from head to foot. I was sent up to you, and soon after our dear little Edie is summoned to the library. Come, don't look so innocent, darling. You do understand."

"That Mr. Stratton has come to propose for Edie's hand?"

"Of course."

Myra's brow contracted a little, and there was a puzzled look in her eyes as she said gently :

"Yes, he has been very attentive to her often. Well, I like Mr. Stratton very much, Mr. Barron."

"James," he said reproachfully.

"James," she said, as if repeating a lesson, in a dreamy tone, and her eyes were directed toward the door.

"I like him, too, now that I am quite safe. There was a time, dear, when I first came here, and had my doubts. I fancied a rival in Mr. Stratton."

"A rival?" she said, starting and coloring.

"Yes ; but so I did in any man who approached you, dearest. But there never was anything—the slightest flirtation?"

"No, never," she said quickly.

"Of course not ; and I am so happy, Myra. You, so young and beautiful, to awaken first to love at my words. But are you not cruel and cold to me still? Our marriage so soon, and you treat me only kindly, as if I were a friend, instead of as the man so soon to be your husband."

Myra withdrew her hand, for the door opened, and Edith entered the room, looking troubled and disturbed.

"Good-by, then, once more, dearest," said Barron, taking Myra's hand, "till dinner time. Ah, Edie!" he said



as he crossed to the door, which she was in the act of closing. Then, in a whisper: "Am I to congratulate you? My present will be a suite of pearls."

Eddie started, and Barron smiled, nodded, and passed out. As he descended the stairs his ears twitched, and his whole attention seemed to be fixed upon the library door, but he could hear no sound, and, taking his hat and gloves from the table, he passed out of the great hall, erect, handsome, and with a self-satisfied smile, before the butler could reach it in answer to the drawing room bell.

"Wedding a statue," he said to himself. "But the statue is thickly gilt, and the marble underneath may be made to glow without a West Indian sun. So it was little Eddie, then. He hasn't bad taste. The dark horse was not dangerous after all, and was not run for coin."

He was so intent upon his thoughts that he did not notice a hansom cab drawn up about a hundred yards from the house, in which a man was seated, watching him intently, and leaning forward more and more till he was about to pass, when there was a sharp *pst-pst*, which made him turn and scowl at the utterer of the signal.

"Hi! What a while you've been."

"What the devil brings you here?" said Barron.

"To find you, of course," said the man sourly. "Thought you'd be there."

Barron looked quickly toward Sir Mark's house, turned, and said sharply:

"What is it?"

"Jump in, and I'll tell you," whispered the man. "Getting hot."

Barron jumped into the cab, which was rapidly driven off after instructions had been given through the trap to the driver, and the next minute it was out of sight.

Meanwhile, Eddie had stood listening till she heard the hall door closed, and then turned to where her cousin was



gazing thoughtfully at the window, not having moved since Barron left the room.

"Listening to his beloved footsteps, Myra?" said Edie sarcastically.

Myra turned upon her with her eyes flashing, but a smile came upon her lips, and she said :

"Well, Edie, am I to congratulate you, too?"

"What about?" flashed out the girl, bitterly mortified by the position in which she had been placed. "Being made a laughing stock for you?"

"What do you mean, dear?" said Myra, startled by the girl's angry way; but there was no answer, and, full of eagerness now, Myra caught her hands. "Mr. Barron said just now that Mr. Stratton came to propose for you."

"For me?" cried Edith bitterly. "Absurd!"

"But I always thought he was so attentive to you, dear. I always felt that you were encouraging him."

"Oh, how can people be so stupidly blind!" cried Edie, snatching herself away. "It is ridiculous."

"But, Edie, he was always with you. When he came here, or we met him and his friend at auntie's——"

"Leave his friend alone, please," raged the girl. Then, trembling at her sudden outburst, she continued seriously :

"Always with me! Of course he was : to sit and pour into my ears praises of you ; to talk about your playing and singing, and ask my opinion of this and that which you had said and done, till I was sick of the man. Do you hear? Sick of him!"

A mist began to form before Myra's eyes, gradually shutting her in as she sank back in her chair, till all around was darkness, and she could not see the unwonted excitement of her cousin, who, with her fingers tightly enlaced, kept on moving from place to place, and talking rapidly.

But there was a bright light beginning to flash out in



Myra's inner consciousness, and growing moment by moment, till the maiden calm within her breast was agitated by the first breathings—the forerunners of a tempest—and she saw little thoughts of the past, which she had crushed out at once as silly girlish fancies, rising again, and taking solid shape. Looks that had more than once startled her and set her thinking, but suppressed at once as follies, now coming back to be illumined by this wondrous light, till, in the full awakening that had come, she grasped the sides of the chair and began to tremble, as Edie's voice came out from beyond the darkness, in which externals were shrouded, the essence of all coming home to her in one terrible reproach, as she told herself that she had been blind, and that the awakening to the truth had come too late.

“How could you—how could you!” cried Edie in a low voice, full of the emotion which stirred her. “You thought I loved Malcolm? O Myry, as if I should have kept it from you if I had. Like him? Yes, always as the dearest, best fellow I ever met. I didn't mean it, dear. I never was sick of him; but he used to make me angry, because I felt that he almost worshiped you, and was making me a stepping-stone to get nearer. Well, why don't you ask me why I did not speak?”

There was no reply, and Edie went on as if she had been answered.

“Of course I could not say a word. One day I felt sure that he loved you, and would confide in me; the next time we met he was so quiet and strange that I told myself it was all fancy, and that I should be a silly, matchmaking creature if I said a word. Besides, how could I? What would uncle, who has been so good to me, have thought if I had seemed to encourage it? And you, all the time, like a horrid, cold, marble statue at an exhibition, with no more heart or care, or else you would have seen.”

Edie relieved her feelings by unlacing her fingers, taking



out her handkerchief from her pocket and beginning to tear it.

"And now," she went on, "you tell me you believed that he cared for me, and suggest that but for this idea things might have been different. But they would not have been. You are a hard, cold, heartless creature, Myra. He was too poor for you, and not likely to buy you diamonds and pearls like Mr. Barron does. Promise me pearls, would he! Insulting me as he did this morning! Why, I would rather have Malcolm Stratton without a penny than Mr. Barron with all the West Indies and East Indies, too, for a portion. Malcolm is worth a hundred millions of him, and I hope you are happy now, for I shouldn't wonder if you've broken the poor fellow's heart."

Myra could bear no more, and turning sharply toward her cousin she stretched out her hands imploringly, as her pale face, with its wild looking, dilated eyes seemed to ask for help. But the look was not seen, for, bursting into a fit of weeping, Edie cried:

"But it's too late now! I hope you'll be happy, dear, and uncle satisfied; but you will repent it, I am sure, for I don't believe you love Mr. Barron the slightest bit."

As she spoke those last words she left the room, and Myra was alone with thoughts which grew and swelled till she felt half suffocated, while, like some vibrating, echoing stroke of a distant knell, came the repetition of those two words, quivering through every nerve and fiber of her being:

"Too late—too late—too late!"

For the bud of love had been lying dormant in her breast, waiting to expand, and it was opening fast now, as she felt, but only to be withered as its petals fell apart.

Hurried on by Barron's impetuous advances, approved as a suitor by her father, her betrothed's courtship had carried all before it. His attentions had pleased her, and she had



reproached herself at times after he had complained that she was cold. One evening, when assailed by doubts of herself, she had appealed to her father and asked him if he wished her to marry Mr. Barron, and she recalled his words when she had dreamily said that she did not think she loved him.

“Why, of course I wish it, my darling,” he cried; “and as to the love—oh, that will come. Don’t let schoolgirl fancies and romances which you have read influence you, my child. You esteem Mr. Barron, do you not?”

She had said that she did, and then let herself subside into a dreamy state, principally taken up by thoughts of the change, the preparations for that change, and visions of the glorious country—all sunshine, languor, and delights—which Barron never seemed to tire of painting.

But now the awakening had come—now that it was too late!

That night, hollow-eyed, and as if he had risen from a sick bed, Malcolm sat writing in his chambers by the light of his shaded lamp. The old paneled room looked weird and strange, and dark shadows lurked in the corners and were cast by the flickering flames of the fire on his left.

Since his return from the Jerrolds’ he had gone through a phase of agony and despair so terrible that his actions, hidden from all within that solitary room, had resembled those of the insane; but at last the calm had come, and after sitting for some time looking his position in the face, he had set to work writing two or three letters, and then commenced one full of instructions to Percy Guest, telling him how to act when he received that letter, asking his forgiveness, and ending by saying:

I cannot face it. You will call me a coward, perhaps, but you would not if you could grasp all. I am perfectly calm now, sensible of the awful responsibilities of my act, but after what I have gone through



since I have been here alone to-day I know perfectly well that my reason is failing, and that in a few hours the paroxysm will return, finding me weaker than before. Better the end at once than after a few months' or years' living death, confined among other miserables like myself.

It was my all—my one aim, Guest, for which I toiled so hard, fighting for success. And the good fortune has come in company with a failure so great that the success is nothing.

Good-by.

He read his letter over as calmly as if it contained memoranda to send to a friend prior to his departure on a short journey. Then, folding it, inclosing it in an envelope, he directed it, and laid it carefully beside the others on the table before sinking back in his chair.

“Is there anything else?” he said quietly.

At that moment the clock on a cabinet rung out the musical chimes of four quarters, and a deeper toned bell sounded the hour.

“Ten,” he said, smiling. “Two hours more and then the beginning of a longer day.”

He opened a drawer, took out a parchment label, and wrote upon it carefully :

To Edward Brettison, when time is no more for his obliged and grateful friend,

MALCOLM STRATTON.

Rising from his chair he crossed to the cabinet, tied the label to one of the handles of the clock, then opened the door beneath, and laid bare a shelf of bottles, while a penetrating odor of camphor and other gums floated out into the room—a familiar odor to those who study natural history, and preserve specimens of insect or bird life.

He had to move two or three bottles to get at one with a large neck and stopper, which he shook up and loosened several pieces of dull looking white crystal. One of these pieces he turned out on to the table by his letters, hesitated, and jerked out another. Then, setting down the bottle, he



crossed the room to where a table-filter stood on a bracket, and returned with the large *carafe* and a tumbler, which he filled nearly full of water. These two he set down on the table, and taking up one of the lumps of crystal he dropped it into the glass, taking care that no water should sprinkle over the side.

He held it up to his lamp to see how quickly it would dissolve, set it down again, and dropped in the second piece before beginning to tap the table with his nails, watching the crystalline pieces the while.

"Quick and painless, I hope," he said quietly. "Bah ! I can bear a little pain."

He turned in his chair with a laugh, which froze upon his lips as he saw his shadow on a panel a few yards away, the weird aspect of the moving figure having so terrible an effect upon his shattered nerves that he sprang from his seat and fled to the wall, where he stood breathing hard.

"Yes, I know," he cried wildly. "Only my shadow, but it is coming back—— I cannot—it is more than man can bear."

There was a wild despair in his utterance, and he shrank away more and more toward the doorway leading to the further room. Then, as if making a supreme effort, he drew himself up erect, with his lips moving rapidly in a low murmur, stepped firmly toward the table and seized the glass.



## CHAPTER XI.

### FATE !

**B**ARRON was back to dine at the admiral's that night, but the dinner was not a success. Myra was singularly cold and formal in her manner ; Edie pleaded a headache ; and the admiral was worried by recollections of the morning's blunder, and felt awkward and constrained with his guest.

Strive hard as he would he could not help making comparisons, and a curious feeling of pity came over him as he thought of Stratton's blank face and the look of despair in his eyes, while he half wished that he had not allowed himself to be so easily won over to the engagement.

"For he is, after all, nearly a stranger," he mused as his son-in-law elect tried hard to secure Myra's interest in a society anecdote he was retailing, to which she listened and that was all. "Yes, a stranger," mused Sir Mark. "I know very little about him. Bah ! Absurd ! What should I know of any man who wanted to marry my girl ? I might meet his relatives, and there would be a certain amount of intercourse, but if I knew them for fifty years it would not make the man a good husband to my poor girl. He loves her dearly ; he is a fine, clever, manly fellow ; there is no doubt about the Barron estate in Trinidad, and he has a handsome balance at his banker's."

The ladies rose soon after, and Barron held the door open, returning slowly to his seat, and shrugging his shoulders slightly. For there had been no tender look as Myra passed out, and Barron's thought was justified.



"Don't seem as if we were engaged. I hope," he said aloud, "Myra is not unwell."

"Eh? Oh, no, my dear boy, no. Girls do come over grumpy sometimes. Here, try this claret, and let's have a cozy chat for an hour before we go up."

"An hour?" said Barron, with a raising of the eyebrows.

"Yes; why not? You're not a love-sick boy, and you'll have plenty of your wife by and by."

"Not a boy, certainly, sir. As to the love sickness—well, I don't know. But—yes, that's a good glass of claret. Larose, eh?"

"Yes. Fill your glass again."

"Willingly," said Baron, obeying his host, and pushing back the jug, "for I want to talk to you, sir, very seriously. and one seems to get on over a glass of wine."

"To talk to me?" said Sir Mark sharply, for his nerves were still ajar. "Nothing the matter?"

"Yes—and no."

"Look here, Barron," cried Sir Mark excitedly, "no beating about the bush. If you want to draw back from your engagement say so like a man."

"If I want to draw back from my engagement, my dear sir? What in the world are you thinking about?"

"I—er—well, your manner was so strange."

"Not strange, Sir Mark: serious. There are serious moments in my life. By the way, I have seen my solicitor again respecting the settlements, and the papers will be ready at any time."

"No hurry, sir, no hurry," said Sir Mark, frowning. "Well?"

Barron drew a long breath.

"Well, what is it, man—what is wrong?"

"Only the old story. When the cat's away the mice will play."



“What do you mean?”

“I’ve had bad news from my agent in Trinidad.”

“Indeed!”

“He writes to me by this mail that he has done his best, but the estate needs my immediate supervision—that he cannot exert the same influence and authority that I should.”

“Losses?”

“Oh, no; gains—that is, a little on the right side. But a little is absurd. Those plantations ought to produce a princely revenue.”

The admiral looked at his guest keenly.

“Well,” he said at last, “what does this mean?”

“That in spite of everything—my own desires and the love I have for England—I shall have to run across as soon as possible.”

“For how long?”

“I cannot say—probably for a year.”

“Hah!” ejaculated the admiral, with a sigh of relief. A year before he would be compelled to part with his child.

“And under the circumstances, Sir Mark, I am obliged to throw myself upon your mercy.”

“What do you mean?” cried the admiral in alarm.

“Can you ask, sir?” said Barron reproachfully. “I know it is making a great demand upon you and dear Myra; but life is short, and I ask you if my position would not be terrible. It would be like exile to me. I could not bear it. I would say to my agent, ‘Let the estate go to——’ never mind where; but that would be courting ruin at a time when I am beginning to learn the value of money, as a slave of the lamp, who can, at my lightest order, bring everything I desire to lay at my darling’s feet.”

“You mean,” cried the admiral hotly, “that you want the wedding hurried on?”



"To be plain, Sir Mark, I do. In a month from now. I must go by the next mail boat but one."

"It is impossible, sir!" cried Sir Mark.

Barron shook his head and the admiral changed his position in his chair.

"But Myra?" he cried. "Oh, she would never consent to its being so soon."

"I believe our dear Myra would, in the sweetness of her disposition alone, consent, Sir Mark," said Barron gravely; "and as soon as she knows of the vital importance of time to the man who will be her husband, she will endeavor to meet his wishes in every way."

"Yes, yes; she is a dear, good girl," said Sir Mark; "but this is terrible: so soon."

"The time for parting must come, Sir Mark, sooner or later; and think: it is for her benefit and happiness. Well, yes, I must confess to my own selfish wishes."

"And then there is her aunt—my sister. She would never consent to—— Yes, I know exactly what she would say—such indecent haste."

"Only an elderly lady's objection, Sir Mark," said Barron, smiling. "You are certainly bringing forward a real difficulty now, for I fear that I have never found favor in Miss Jerrold's eyes. But surely she has no right to dictate in a case like this. Nay, let us have no opposition. I will appeal to Miss Jerrold myself. She is too high-minded and sweet a lady to stand in the way of her niece's and my happiness. I am satisfied of that. Come, Sir Mark, look at the case plainly. You have been a sailor, sir, and know the meaning of sudden orders to join. Nothing would stop you. Mine are not so sudden, for I have—that is, at all risks, I will have—a month. My fortune is at stake—Myra's fortune, I may say. Help me as you feel the case deserves."



The admiral was silent for a few minutes, during which he filled and emptied his claret glass twice.

"You've floored me, Barron," he said at last. "I can't find an argument against you."

"Then you consent? And you will help me in every way?"

"It is hard work, my boy—a terrible wrench, but I suppose I must. In a month," he muttered; "so soon—and for her to sail right away for a whole year."

Barron wrung his hand hard and smiled.

"How long will it be, my dear sir, before your old taste for the sea returns? Why, you'll be running across before three months are past. Really I should not be surprised if you announced that you meant to come with us."

"Hah! Why not?" cried Sir Mark eagerly. "No, no; that would not do. But I certainly will run over before long."

"Do, sir," cried Barron eagerly.

"Barbadoes, Bahamas, Bermuda," cried Sir Mark. "Why, I could take a trip anywhere among the islands. It's all familiar ground to me. But poor Myra—a month; so soon. I don't feel as if I am doing right, Barron; but there, it is fate."

"Yes, sir, it is fate."



## CHAPTER XII.

### GUEST PAYS A LATE VISIT.

THE crystals had dissolved in the glass as Stratton held it up and gazed fixedly at its contents, his face, stern and calm, dimly seen in the shadow, while the shape of the vessel he grasped was plainly delineated against the white blotting paper, upon which a circle of bright light was cast by the shaded lamp.

He was not hesitating, but thinking calmly enough. The paroxysm of horror had been mastered, and as a step was faintly heard crossing the court, he was trying to think out whether there was anything else which he ought to do before that cold hand gripped him and it would be too late.

He looked round, set down the glass for a moment by his letters, and thrusting aside the library chair he used at his writing table, he wheeled forward a lounge seat ready to receive him as he sank back, thinking quietly that the action of the terrible acid would perhaps be very sudden.

Anything more ?

He smiled pleasantly, for a fresh thought flashed across his mind, and taking an envelope he bent down and directed it plainly, and without the slightest trembling of his hand, to Mrs. Brade.

“Poor, gossiping old thing !” he said. “She has been very kind to me. It will be a shock, but she must bear it like the rest.”

He took a solitary five-pound note from his pocketbook, thrust it into the envelope, wrote inside the flap, “For your



own use," and moistened and secured it before placing it with the other letters.

"About nine to-morrow morning she will find it," he thought, "and then—poor soul! poor soul! The police and—I shall be asleep."

"God—forgive me!" he said slowly as, after a step in front of the easy-chair he had placed ready, he once more raised the glass, and closing his eyes:

"To Myra," he said, with a bitter laugh; and it was nearly at his lips when there was a sharp double knock at his outer door.

A fierce look of anger came into his countenance as he stood glaring in the direction of the summons. Then, raising the glass again, he was about to drink when there was a louder knocking.

Stratton hesitated, set down the glass, crossed the room, and threw open the doors, first one and then the other, with the impression upon him that by some means his intentions had been divined and that it was the police.

"Having a nap, old fellow?" cried Guest hurriedly, as he stepped in, Stratton involuntarily giving way. "I was crossing the inn and saw your light. Thought I'd drop in for a few moments before going to my perch."

He did not say that he had been pacing the inn and its precincts for hours, longing to hear the result of his friend's visit to Bourne Square, but unable to make up his mind to go up till the last, when, in a fit of desperation, he had mounted the stairs.

"I will not quarrel with him if he is the winner. One was obliged to go down. I can't afford to lose lover and friend in one day, even if it does make one sore."

He had taken that sentence and said it in a hundred different ways that evening, and it was upon his lips as he had at last knocked at Stratton's door.



Upon his first entrance he had not noticed anything particular in his friend, being in a feverish, excited state, full of his own disappointment ; but as Stratton remained silent, gazing hard at him, he looked in his face wonderingly ; and as, by the half light, he made out his haggard countenance and the wild, staring look in his eyes, a rush of hope sent the blood bubbling, as it were, through his veins. "Has she refused him?" rang in his ears, and, speechless for the moment, with his heart throbbing wildly, and his throat hot and dry, he took a step forward as he saw *carafe* and water glass before him, caught up the latter, and raised it to his lips.

But only to start back in wonder and alarm, for, with a hoarse cry, Stratton struck the glass from his hand, scattered its contents over the hearthrug, and the glass itself flew into fragments against the bars of the grate.

"Here, what's the matter with you, old fellow?" cried Guest wonderingly. "Don't act like that."

Stratton babbled a few incoherent words, and sank back in the lounge, covering his face with his hands, and a hoarse hysterical cry escaped from his lips.

Guest looked at him in astonishment, then at the table, where, in the broad circle of light, he saw the letters his friend had written, one being directed to himself.

They explained little, but the next instant he saw the wide-mouthed, stoppered bottle, caught it up, examined the label, and held it at arm's length.

"The cyanide!" he cried excitedly. "Mal! Stratton, old chap! Good God! You surely—no, it is impossible. Speak to me, old man! Tell me, or I shall go mad! Did Edie refuse you?"

Stratton's hands dropped from his face as he rose in his seat, staring wildly at his friend.

"Edie!" he said wonderingly.

"Yes, Edie!" cried Guest excitedly as he bent down



toward his friend. "Here, stop a minute ; what shall I do with this cursed stuff ?"

Striding to the window, he threw it open, leaned out, and dashed the bottle down upon the pavement, shivering it and its contents to fragments.

"Now speak," he cried as soon as he had returned. "No fooling, man ; speak the truth."

"Edie ?" said Stratton again as he sat there trembling as if smitten by some dire disease.

"Yes. You told me you were going to tell her of your success—to ask the admiral to give you leave to speak to her."

"No, no," said Stratton slowly.

"Are you mad, or have you been drinking ?" cried Guest angrily, and he caught his friend by the shoulders.

"Don't—don't, Percy," said Stratton feebly. "I'm not myself to-night. I—I——Why did you come ?" he asked vacantly.

"Because it was life or death to me," cried Guest. "I couldn't say a word to you then, but I've loved little Edie ever since we first met. You were my friend, Mal, and I couldn't say anything when I saw you two so thick together. She seemed to prefer your society to mine, and she had a right to choose. I've been half mad to-day since you told me you cared for her, but I couldn't sleep till I knew all the worst."

"I told you I loved Edith Perrin ?"

"Yes ! Are you so stupefied by what you have taken that you don't know what you are saying ?"

"I know what I am saying," said Stratton, almost in a whisper. "I never told you that."

"I swear you did, man. You don't know what you say."

"I told you I was going to see the admiral. All a mistake—your's—mine," he gasped feebly.



"What do you mean?" cried Guest, shaking him.

"I always liked little Edie, but it was Myra I loved."

"What?" cried Guest wildly.

"I spoke to her father to-day, plainly, as—as—an honest man. Too late, old fellow; too late."

"Too late?"

"She is engaged—to be married—to the admiral's friend."

"Barron?"

"Yes."

"I thought as much. Then it was all a mistake about Edie!" cried Guest wildly. "I beg your pardon, Mal. I'm excited, too. I'm awfully sorry, though, old man. But tell me," he cried, changing his manner. "Those letters—that glass? Great Heavens! You were never going to be such a madman, such an idiot, as to—— Oh, say it was all a mistake!"

"That I should have been a dead man by this?" said Stratton solemnly. "That was no mistake," he murmured piteously. "What is there to live for now?"



## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE WEDDING DAY.

FOUR weeks had passed since Malcolm Stratton's insane attempt—four weeks of an utterly prostrating illness from which he was slowly recovering, when, one morning, Guest entered the room where Brettison was seated by his friend's couch, and made an announcement which wrought a sudden change in the convalescent.

"I expected it," he said quietly; and then, after a pause, "I will go with you."

Guest opened and shut his mouth without speaking for a few moments. Then:

"Go—with me? You go with me? Why, it would be madness."

"Madness, madness, old fellow," said Stratton feebly, "but I tell you I am quite strong now."

"Very far from it," said Brettison.

"And I say so too," cried Guest. "Look here, old fellow, do you mean to assert that you are *compos mentis*?"

"Of course," said Stratton, smiling.

"Then I say you are not," cried Guest, "and Mr. Brettison will second me. You are weak as a rat in spite of all our watching, and feeding, and care."

"All this long, weary month," sighed Stratton. "Heaven bless you both for what you have done."

"Never mind about blessings; be a little grateful to Mr. Brettison, who has been like a hundred hospital nurses rolled into one, and give up this mad idea."

"But it is not mad," pleaded Stratton. "I only want to



go to the church. I am quite strong enough now. I want to see her married, that is all. Mr. Brettison, you see how calm I am."

"Yes, very," said the old botanist, smiling sadly. "Calm with your temples throbbing and your veins too full. My dear boy, if you go to that wedding, you will overexcite yourself and we shall have a serious relapse."

"If I do go?" said Stratton quietly. "I shall certainly have it. I mean to go."

He rose from the couch on which he had been lying, walked into the bedroom, and closed the door.

"Did you ever see such a mule, Mr. Brettison?" cried Guest as soon as they were alone. "I was a fool to come in and tell him I was going; but I thought he had got over it, and he knew it was to-day."

"You are going as one of the friends?"

"Yes, Miss Jerrold asked me," said Guest, rather consciously; "and of course he would have known afterward, and reproached me for not telling him. What is to be done?"

"Certainly not thwart him," replied Brettison. "I was going out into the country to-day."

"Collecting?"

"Yes, my dear sir, a little. My great hobby, Mr. Guest. But I will not go. We should do more harm than good by stopping him, so I'll go to the church with him."

"But I dread a scene," said Guest. "Suppose he should turn wild at seeing her lead up the aisle. Fancy the consequences. It would be cruel to the lady. It is not as if she had jilted him."

"Never cared for him a bit, did she?" whispered Brettison.

"H'm! Well, sir, I don't quite like to say. At all events, Miss Myra Jerrold accepted this Mr. Barron before



poor old Malcolm spoke a word, and I am convinced that she felt certain he did not care for her."

"An unfortunate business, Guest. Poor lad! poor lad! But there, he recovered, and any opposition would, I am sure, throw him back."

"But the lady?"

"Have no fear; Malcolm Stratton will, I am sure, be guilty of no insane folly. I know him better than you, Guest."

"I think not," said the young man, smiling.

"We will not argue the point," replied the old botanist, taking Guest's hand. "We both think we know him better than anyone else, and after all have not half sounded the depths of his nature."

"Well, I leave him to you," said Guest. "I have no time to spare. I'm off now, old fellow," he cried, approaching the bedroom door.

"All right," cried Stratton cheerfully as he came back and held out his hand. "My kindest regards to Edie. Don't be afraid, old fellow; I am going to behave sensibly. You need not fear a scene."

"But I——"

"Don't deny it, lad. Off with you," said Stratton, smiling at his friend's confusion; and he accompanied him out on to the landing. "God bless her!" he said. "I wish her every happiness with the man of her choice. It's all over now, and I can bear it like a man."

They shook hands and parted, and when, an hour later, Guest saw Myra enter the room, where he was just snatching a hurried word with Edie, he was startled at the white, set face, and strange, dreamy eyes, which looked in his when he spoke to her.

But what had been a bitter fight was at an end, and all its secrets hidden in the bride's own breast. For a time, as it had dawned upon her that there was something warmer than



friendship in her breast for Malcolm Stratton, she shrank in horror from the idea of pledging herself to the man she had accepted ; but she fought with and crushed down her feelings. Stratton must, she felt, despise her now, and she was engaged to Barron. It was her father's wish, and she had promised to be this man's wife, while that he loved her he gave her no room to doubt.

"I *will* do my duty by him," she said proudly to herself as she took her father's arm ; and as Guest was driven in another of the carriages to the church, he thought to himself that his friend had been blind in his love, for Myra was hard and unemotional as her cousin was sweet and lovable.

He misjudged her again as he saw her leave the church leaning upon her husband's arm, while now he was privileged to escort Edie, one of the four bridesmaids, back to Bourne Square.

"She never would have cared for poor old Malcolm," he said to himself as he followed the newly married couple with his eyes, Barron careworn and nearly as pale as his wife, but looking proud, eager, and handsome, as he handed Myra into the carriage.

"The happy pair," whispered Edie as she placed her little hand upon Guest's arm. "Get me to the carriage, please, as quickly as you can, or I shall cry and make a scene."

"Yes, yes," he whispered back. "This way ; but, Edie, I've been looking all round the church and can't see him. Did you catch sight of Stratton ?"

"No," said the girl with some asperity, "and did not wish to. I could only see that poor girl going through the ceremony, and I felt all the time I could read her thoughts. O Percy Guest, if she only had not had so much pride, or Malcolm Stratton had been as bold as he was shrinking and strange, this never could have been !"

Back at Bourne Square, with all the hurry and excite-



ment of a wedding morning. The house crowded with friends, and Sir Mark all eagerness to do the honors of his place well to all. Carriages thronged the roadway; a couple of policemen kept back the little crowd, and the admiral's servants, re-enforced by half a dozen of Gunter's men, had a busy time supplying the wants of the guests.

"Well, you two," said a voice, suddenly, behind Edie, who was listening to a remark made by Guest, "don't look in that dreamy way at everyone. I've been watching you for ever so long. Don't you know that this is the happiest day of Myra's life?"

"No, aunt," said Edie shortly; "do you?"

Miss Jerrold shrugged her shoulders.

"Go and keep near her, my dear, till they leave. I haven't the heart. Edie, am I a wretchedly prejudiced old maid, or is there something not nice about that man?"

"Ah, there you are, Edie," cried the admiral excitedly. "Myra is just going to cut the cake. Mr. Guest, take my sister and give her some champagne. Edie, my dear, I don't like poor Myra's looks. I must see to the people, and have a word with James Barron before they start; and I've got to speak, too, and how to get through it I don't know."

"What do you want me to do, uncle?"

"What I told you, my dear," cried the old man testily. "Go and keep with my poor darling till the last."

Edie crept to her cousin's side and stayed there during the admiral's speech, one which contained more heart than head; listened with heaving breast to the toast of the bride's health, and to the well-spoken, manly reply made by James Barron. And so on till the time when the bride might slip away to change her dress for the journey down to Southampton, the wedding trip commencing the next day on board the great steamer outward bound for the West.



"Guest, my lad," said the admiral, drawing the young man aside, "servants are all very well, but I'd be thankful if you'd see yourself that Mr. Barron's carriage is up to the door in time. Myra is not well, and she has sent a message to me to beg that she may be allowed to slip away quietly with few good-bys. I suppose the people will have all the satin slipper and rice throwing tomfoolery."

"You may depend upon me, Sir Mark," said Guest eagerly; and he set about his task at once, greatly to the butler's disgust.

The minutes went swiftly then; the guests gathering on the staircase and crowding the hall, while the carriage, with its servants, stood waiting, with an avenue of people down to the door.

Guest was on the step seeing that the wraps and various little articles needed on the journey were handed in. Barron, looking flushed and proud, was in the hall, with his hand grasped by Sir Mark, and a murmur of excitement and a cheer announced that the bride was coming down, when the bridegroom's carriage began to move on.

The sudden starting of the horses made Guest turn sharply.

"Hi! Stop! Do you hear?" he shouted, and several of the servants waiting outside took up the cry, "Coming down." But the carriage moved on and a four-wheeled cab took its place, amid a roar of laughter from the crowd.

At the same moment three businesslike looking men stepped into the hall, and before the butler and footmen could stop them they were close up to the foot of the staircase.

Sir Mark turned upon them angrily, but one of them gripped his arm and said quickly:

"Sir Mark Jerrold?"

"Yes. What is this intrusion?"



“Upstairs, sir, quick. Stop the young lady from coming down.”

The man's manner was so impressive that it forced Sir Mark to act, and he shouted up the broad staircase :

“Edie ! one moment—not yet.”

Then, as if resenting the fact that he should have obeyed this man, he turned sharply in time to hear the words :

“James Dale—in the queen's name. Here is my warrant. No nonsense ; we are three to one.”

The bridegroom was struggling in the policemen's arms, and in the hand which he freed there was a revolver.



## CHAPTER XIV.

### STRATTON'S THANKSGIVING.

**T**HERE was a slight struggle, the sharp click of steel, and before Sir Mark could find words to express his rage and astonishment, Barron was being hurried out of the hall by two of the men who had made the unceremonious entry, while the two policemen there for another purpose, in answer to some freemasonry of the force, opened the cab door, and saw the vehicle driven off.

Sir Mark had meantime made an effort to follow, but the man who had spoken barred his way.

“You scoundrel! Who are you?” roared the admiral. “What does this mean?”

“Superintendent Abingdon, Great Scotland Yard, sir,” was the quiet reply. “It means, sir, that I’ve saved the young lady from a painful scene, and you from a terrible mishap.”

“But, oh, there is some horrible blunder! That is my friend, my son-in-law, Mr. Barron.”

“No, sir, an alias. James Dale, whom we have wanted for months. Dodged us by keeping abroad. Couldn’t run him to earth before—stayed on the Continent; and he was off abroad again, but we were just in time.”

“I tell you,” thundered Sir Mark, “it is a horrible mistake. Here, Guest—the carriage: we must follow them at once. Ladies, some of you—oh, here is my sister. Rebecca, go up to Myra and keep her in her room. A little mistake; Barron has been called away—a business mistake. Tell her to be calm. Now, sir,”



he cried sternly to the officer, "you do not leave my side. Mr. Guest, come with us."

"Where to, Sir Mark?" said the man quietly.

"To Scotland Yard."

"Excuse me, sir; it is no mistake. I'll go with you, of course, but you will thank me one of those days for being so prompt. You have been imposed upon by one of the cleverest scoundrels of his time. James Dale is——"

"Mr. James Barron, man."

"No, Sir Mark; James Dale, charged with swindling the Russian government of a tremendous sum by the issuing of forged ruble notes."

"What?"

"And just off to Buenos Ayres."

"To the West Indies, man—to his estate."

"Yes, sir," said the man dryly; "he's going to his estate, but it isn't there."

Sir Mark looked wildly round at the crowd of friends who were drawing away, and without another word accompanied the officer to the carriage, where, as soon as they were started, the latter addressed himself to Guest, the admiral having sunk back in one corner, trying to collect his thoughts, but only to begin listening intently.

"No mistake, sir," said the officer. "I wish for the gentleman's sake there was. The prisoner has been carrying on the game for a long time with a copperplate printer, a man named Henderson—Samuel Henderson. We took him an hour ago, and it was through a letter we found in his pocket that we knew what was going on here, and arrived just in time for the young lady."

Guest glanced at Sir Mark and met his eyes.

"Quite the gentleman, our friend Dale," continued the officer. "Schoolmaster once, I found. Speaks languages, plays, and sings. Great yachting man. Deceive anybody;



but his game's up now. Couldn't live in England as it was. Where did he say he was going—West Indies, sir?"

Guest nodded.

"Well, he was going on farther south. He had taken tickets for the River Plate."

Sir Mark started violently.

There was silence for a few moments, and Guest's resentment against Myra died out as he thought of the poor girl in the power of a scoundrel thousands of miles from home.

"Lady has money, I suppose?" whispered the officer from behind his hand.

Guest gave a short, sharp nod, and then felt annoyed with himself, but the officer took no heed and went on:

"Of course she would have, sir. Well, my gentleman will not be able to touch that, and I suppose there will be no difficulty about getting a divorce."

At those words a flood of thought flashed through Guest's brain, and he recalled conversations held with Edie respecting the marriage, and the girl's boldly expressed belief that her cousin would gladly have drawn back but for her promise and her pride.

He would have hurried off to Benchers' Inn with the information, but he was bound to go on to the police office and see the matter through with Sir Mark; and in due time they reached Scotland Yard, to find Barron, or Dale, in a kind of desk, listening carelessly to the evidence given by the officers who had helped to execute the warrant.

But the man's whole aspect changed as he saw Sir Mark and Guest enter.

"Hah!" he cried; "at last. Now, Mr. Inspector, or whatever you are, this is Admiral Sir Mark Jerrold, my father-in-law. The whole affair is one of mistaken identity. For Heaven's sake, my dear sir, satisfy these people as to my responsibility, and act as bail for my reappearance. Of



course there will be no Southampton to-day. How does Myra bear the shock?"

Sir Mark's opinion veered toward the speaker directly, and turning to the officer who had been his companion from the house, he found him smiling.

"There, sir, I told you it was all a mistake."

"Yes, Sir Mark, you did," said the man respectfully; and then to a couple of policemen: "Bring them in."

"The luggage?" cried Guest as he saw what was being borne in by the men.

"Yes, sir," said the officer. "I stepped back to give instructions to our men to bring on everything from the carriage, and the trunks sent on to Waterloo. They must be searched for incriminating evidence. The lady's luggage will be sent back to Bourne Square at once."

"The insolence of the scoundrels!" cried Barron. "My dear Sir Mark, pray get this wretched business finished."

"I can save the gentleman a good deal of trouble, Dale," said the inspector in charge.

"Are you addressing me, sir?" said the prisoner haughtily.

"Won't do, Dale; the game's up," said the inspector, smiling. Then to Sir Mark:

"I am sorry for you, sir, but this is no case for bail."

"But I will be his security for any amount," cried Sir Mark, who crushed down the belief that he had been deceived.

"Yes, of course, of course," cried the prisoner.

"No good, Mr. Dale. You can renew the application to the magistrate," said the inspector.

He made a sign, and after a furious burst of protestations the prisoner gave up.

"Communicate with Garner of Ely Place at once for me, Sir Mark," he said at parting. "It will be all right. Com-



fort Myra, and tell her it's an absurd mistake," he continued as Guest was looking at a letter the detective officer held for his perusal ; and then he turned indignantly as Barron held out his hand.

Sir Mark was about to take it when Guest struck the hand down.

"How dare you?" began the prisoner.

"Don't touch the scoundrel, Sir Mark," cried Guest fiercely. "It is all true."

"You cur!" roared the prisoner. "You turn against me? But I know the reason for that: our friend the rejected in Benchers' Inn."

"Come away, Sir Mark," cried Guest. "The man is an utter knave."

"I will not believe it," cried Sir Mark.

"Read that letter, then," said Guest quietly, "written on paper bearing your crest, from your own house, to his confederate Samuel Henderson, the printer of the forged Russian notes."

Sir Mark sat silent and thoughtful in the corner of his carriage as he and Guest were driven back, till they were near the house, when he turned suddenly to his companion.

"Thank you, Guest," he said warmly. "Nothing like a friend in need. Hang it, sir, I'd sooner take my ships into action again than meet my guests here at home. But it has to be done," he said, "and our side beaten. I will not believe that Mr. Barron is guilty, nor yet that I could have been made a fool. The man is a gentleman, and I'll stand by him to the last in spite of all that is said against him. What do you say, sir—what do you say?"

"Do you wish me to speak, Sir Mark?"

"Of course."

"Then I say that the man is an utter scoundrel; that you have been horribly deceived; and that—there, I am making you angry."



"Not a bit, Guest ; not a bit. I'm afraid you are right, but I must fight this out."

The door was reached and Sir Mark uttered a sigh of relief, for there was no crowd—not a carriage to be seen ; and, upon entering the house, it was to find that every friend and visitor had departed.

Sir Mark strode in upright and firm, and Guest stopped to say good-by.

"No, no, my lad; don't leave me yet," said the old man. "Come up and face the ladies first."

He led the way up into the drawing room, expecting to find Myra prostrate ; but there was only one figure to greet him—his sister. The door, however, had hardly closed before Edie, who had been with her cousin, ran into the room flushed and eager.

"Where is Myra ?"

"Lying down, uncle. We—auntie and I—persuaded her to go to her room."

"Is she much broken down—much——"

"My dear Mark !" cried his sister sharply, "Myra is a sensible girl. Now, then, don't keep us in suspense. Tell me : is it all true about that man ?"

"Yes, Rebecca—I mean no," cried Sir Mark furiously; "of course not, and I'm going to instruct counsel and—damme, it's some enemy's work. I'll pour such a broad-side into him ! Why, confound it all !" he cried, as a sudden thought struck him, and he turned to Guest, "this must be some of your friend's work."

"Sir Mark !"

"Oh, uncle !"

"Don't talk stuff, Mark," cried his sister almost at the same moment. "Is it likely ? Then it is all true. What an escape ! Well, I'm glad it happened when it did."

Sir Mark gave a furious stamp on the floor, but turned calmly enough on Guest offering his hand.



"You will excuse me now, Sir Mark."

"Eh? What? Going? Well, if you must. But don't leave me in the lurch, my lad. Come back and have a bit of dinner with me. I shall be very dull. No; I won't ask you here. It will be miserable. Meet me at the club."

Guest promised, and then shook hands with Miss Jerrold, who pressed his fingers warmly; but when he turned to say good-by to Edie she was not in the room.

"Too upset," he muttered as he went down. "Might have said good-by, though."

"Good-by, Mr. Guest," came from the little conservatory half-way down to the hall; and there was Edie waiting. "No, no; don't stop me. I must run up to Myra. Good-by, Percy. Oh, I am so glad."

"Good-by, *Percy*—good-by, *Percy*," Guest kept on saying to himself as he walked slowly along one side of the square. "*Percy*, for the first time. Good Heavens, Mal!" he cried, starting as a hand was thrust under his arm—"you? I was coming on. I've something particular to tell you."

"Thank you," said Stratton quietly. "I know everything."

"What? I did not see you at the church."

"No; I had not the heart to come. I said I would, but I stayed away."

"Good. Right," said Guest.

"But I was obliged to come to see her go—for one glance unseen."

"And you saw the arrest?"

"I saw the struggle in the crowd. A man hurried into a cab, which was driven off. I was some distance away—in the square."

"Ah!" ejaculated Guest, and then there was a pause, broken at last by Stratton, who said solemnly:

"Saved from a life of misery and despair. Thank God! thank God!"



## CHAPTER XV.

### WIFE TO A CONVICT.

SIR MARK awoke the next morning thoroughly convinced that he had been the victim of a scoundrel, but he kept his word, and did everything possible in the way of providing able legal assistance for his son-in-law. He had taken Myra and her cousin at once to a retired sea-side place within easy reach of town, and made James Dale's case the sole business of his life.

It was a two days' business, that trial, owing to the efforts made by the counsel for the defense, who fought their client's cause gallantly. But it was a losing game from beginning to end ; the proofs were utterly crushing. James Dale had obtained a large income from the forgeries for years, and his companion in the iniquity had purchased property extensively. The West Indian estates were certainly in existence, and belonged to a family named Barron, but in the prisoner's case the name was assumed, and in his real patronymic he, with his confederate, was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude.

"Deserved it, every hour," said Sir Mark, with a sigh of relief, as he drove away from the court with Guest. "Now for a few months of quiet abroad, and then I shall have to see the lawyers again."

Guest looked at him inquiringly.

"Eh? What do I mean? Well, I don't understand much about such matters, but surely under the circumstances the laws of England will not keep my child tied to such a rascal as that."



Guest was about to speak, but the old man interrupted him.

"Fancy, my lad, after an apprenticeship of seven years to a convict's life that fellow knocking at my door, and Andrews coming up to say that he had called for his wife."

Guest shuddered: the idea was horrible.

"No, no, my lad; that would not do at all. But there, say no more about it now. By and by I shall hear what the lawyers think about a divorce."

They shook hands and parted, the admiral going home, and Guest straight to his friend's chambers, where he knocked, but there was no answer.

Brettison came out, though, from the adjoining room.

"He has not come back yet from the trial," Brettison said.

"Indeed! I looked round the court, but could not see him there. You have heard, of course?"

"The verdict? Yes, I was there."

The two men looked inquiringly into each others' eyes, and just then a step was heard upon the stairs.

"Here he is," whispered Guest, and the next minute, looking very calm and self-possessed, Stratton joined them, and asked them in; but Brettison declined, and went back to his own chambers, while Guest followed his friend into his room, thinking, as he entered the quiet, retired place, of how his coming had changed the current of Stratton's career.

"Sit down, old fellow," said Stratton cheerfully, and he opened the closet by the fireplace to reach down a box of cigars, which he handed to Guest, and then took one himself.

"Now for it," thought Guest as Stratton sat back, looking pale still and thin from his illness; but he only went on smoking, apparently waiting for his friend to speak.

"And I don't know what to say," thought Guest.



He was relieved from his embarrassment at last by Stratton beginning to talk about one of the current topics of the day, and he left the chambers at last without there having been the slightest reference to the trial.

Guest found his way to Bourne Square the next afternoon, and was startled to find all the shutters closed and the blinds drawn in the upper rooms.

"Out of town" seemed written plainly all over the house, for that nothing serious was the matter was evident from a friendly chat going on at the area gate between two maids, who had dispensed with the hated headgear of slavery—caps—and were laughing with a rustic looking young milkman.

Guest took a cab and drove to Miss Jerrold's, in Bayswater, to find that lady at home and ready to welcome him.

"Gone, my dear boy," she said. "Gone to Rome first, and the best thing too. Ugh! I never liked that man, Percy Guest. He looked like silver, but I could feel that he was only electro-plate. Well, poor Myra had a terrible escape. It was, of course, her money, and he looked for some of mine."

"But when are they coming back, Miss Jerrold?"

"Oh, not for a long time, I hope. It will be the best thing in the world for poor Myra, and I have been thinking that I shall go and join them soon. Not till they have all had time to calm down. There is nothing to mind till then."

She said these last words so meaningly that Guest gave her an inquiring look, and the old lady smiled.

"You want to know why I said that," she said. "Well, I'll tell you, Percy Guest. Old women can speak pretty plainly, and I can trust you to be discreet. The fact is, my brother is one of the best men that ever breathed, and at sea he had few officers who were his equal, but on shore



he is one of those men whom any clever, designing scoundrel could impose upon, and if I don't go to them and play the dragon of watchfulness we shall be having a foreign count without a penny, or some other dreadful swindler, hoodwinking him till there is another engagement, and poor Myra driven half mad."

"What, after such a lesson as this has been, Miss Jerrold?"

"Of course. Poor Mark will think the best thing for Myra to do will be to marry, so as to get rid of the ambiguous position in which she is placed. Wife to a convict serving his time. Poor child, it gives me a shudder every time I think of it. There, I will not think of it any more. I've made my mind up, and I shall go."

"I would," said Guest eagerly.

"Eh? And pray why, sir?" cried the old lady sharply.

"I thought it would be better," said Guest confusedly.

"For someone we know, eh? No, no, sir. That's all over now. Some people had better treat their lives as schoolboys do their slates: sponge them neatly, make them clean, and begin all over again.



## CHAPTER XVI.

"I SHALL HAVE TO GO."

A YEAR passed rapidly away, during which time Guest's visits were pretty constant to Benchers' Inn, or to that institution where the new curator seemed to have thrown himself with so much spirit into his work that Guest often came to the conclusion that he must have treated his past after the fashion suggested by the admiral's sister. For there were no friendly confidences, and it was only a supposition that Stratton might be well informed as to the doings of the family abroad.

At last one morning, after being expectant and on thorns for weeks, Guest made his way to Bayswater, sending the cabman by a circuitous route, so as to pass through Bourne Square.

The family had not returned, but there were painters at work ; and excited by this, he rang at Miss Jerrold's, was shown up, and as soon as he had shaken hands the old lady tightened her lips and shook her head at him.

"All my good advice thrown away, boy," she said. "Now no deceit ; you've heard news ?"

"Indeed, no," he cried. "I only came through the square."

"On purpose ?"

"Well, yes, and saw that there were men at work painting."

"Pooh !" ejaculated Miss Jerrold. "That may mean my brother is going to let the house."

"But Sir Mark is not going to let the house, Miss Jerrold ?"



"Of course not. Yes ; you are right : they will be back in about a week."

"In a week ?" cried Guest joyously.

"Yes. I wanted to see you, thought. How about your friend, Mr. Stratton: he has forgotten all that mad nonsense, I suppose ?"

Guest was silent for a few moments while the old lady looked at him inquiringly.

"You do not know Malcolm Stratton as I do," he said sadly. "He has never mentioned Miss Myra Jerrold's name——"

"Mrs. Dale's or Barron's," said the lady sternly, but Guest shook his head.

"Since the wedding day, but if I know anything of my friend she has never since been out of his thoughts."

The tears started to Miss Jerrold's eyes.

"Poor boy," she said sadly. "But he must not think of her. My brother had certain thoughts about getting the marriage cancelled, but Myra will not hear of it."

"Surely she does not care for this man ?"

"I don't know, my dear boy. She is a mystery to me. I tried to talk to her several times when I was near, but she closed my lips at once. I am nobody now. I can pretty well manage her father, but—who in the world can this be?" she cried hastily. "I'm not at home."

She rose to ring the bell, but there were steps already on the stairs, and the servant, looking a little startled, opened the door.

"Mr. Stratton, ma'am. He says——"

Stratton was already at the door, looking pale, but with a red spot burning in each cheek.

"You here, Guest !" he said excitedly. "Miss Jerrold, pray ask your niece to see me, if only for a minute."

"My niece, Mr. Stratton," said the old lady coldly, "is in Paris."



"No, no," he cried. "They reached Charing Cross not half an hour ago."

"Stratton, old man," whispered Guest, "for goodness sake, contain yourself. Indeed they are not here."

"Hah!" cried Stratton excitedly as a cab drew up to the door; and he grasped how he had, in his excitement, outstripped with a fast hansom the slow four-wheeled cab; and without giving aunt or friend another thought he dashed downstairs and out to the cab door.

Myra was looking eagerly up at the house as the front door opened, and Edie heard her give a hoarse gasp as she shrank back into the corner of the seat with her face convulsed by a spasm at the unexpected sight of Stratton.

It was only momentary. By the time he reached the cab door, flung it open, and held out his hand, she had drawn herself up, and it was a calm, dignified, graceful woman of the world who gave the trembling man her hand to help her to alight.

"Ah, Mr. Stratton," she said, and her voice thrilled him, "I did not expect to see you here. I hope you have quite recovered from your illness. Thanks. Mr. Guest too. Yes, you may take my wrappers. Ah, there is aunt. Aunt dear, we have taken you quite by storm. Papa had letters yesterday which he said must be attended to personally at once. Can you take us in, or must we go to an hotel?"

This last in the hall, to which, trembling at the meeting, Aunt Rebecca had come down to embrace her nieces.

"Yes, yes, my dear; come in. So glad—so very glad. Mr. Guest, would you mind—the cabman?"

She handed the young man her purse, but Myra checked her.

"No, no, aunt dear; papa did see to that. So kind of you to have old friends here as a surprise."

"No, no, my dear, an accident; and—and—they were just going away."



"Yes," said Stratton in a strange voice as he held out his hand and gazed with agonized eyes wistfully in those which looked so calmly in his ; " we were just going—Miss Jerrold."

"Mrs. Barron, Mr. Stratton," said Myra quietly, with just a suspicion of reproach in her voice, as she gave him her hand. "Papa was talking about you the other day. I am sure he will be glad to see old friends again."

She turned from him and shook hands with Guest, while Edie, with tears in her eyes, approached Stratton.

"So —— to see you again, Mr. Stratton," she whispered, with the "glad" inaudible, but it was of no consequence, being quite out of place.

He shook hands with her mechanically, but he did not seem to see her or hear her words, and she caught Guest's arm.

"Get him away," she whispered. "It was madness. Pray go, for everyone's sake."

Guest nodded, took his friend's arm, and the pair walked slowly away in silence till Stratton uttered a low, strange laugh, and as Guest met his wild eyes :

"No, old fellow," he said quietly. "I am not going mad—unless it was madness to obey the promptings of my poor, weak nature. Better come with me to my rooms, for something seems to keep on asking me if life is not all one great mistake."

Meanwhile at Miss Jerrold's house, the moment the door was closed, Myra had caught wildly at her cousin's hand.

"Quick !" she cried in a hoarse whisper, "take me to our room," and with wild energy she hurried her cousin upstairs to close and lock the door before she gave vent to the wild, hysterical burst of agony that was struggling for exit.

"So cruel—so heartless," she sobbed as she paced the floor, wringing her hands and rejecting every attempt at



consolation on her cousin's part. "He must have known. Oh, it's maddening."

"Myra, be calm, be calm."

"Calm!" cried Myra wildly, "it is not possible. Do you think me made of stone instead of flesh and blood like yourself? You—my father—my aunt—all treat me as if I were a child whom a word or two will set free. I tell you again I am that man's wife. In my weakness and folly, blind to what I called my duty, I went headlong into that gulf of despair. I swore before the altar to be his wife till death should us part. It is my fate, and there can be no change."

"But Myra—dear cousin!"

"I tell you, Edie, there is not an hour passes without my seeing him once more before me holding my hand, with his eyes telling me that I am his wife, and," she cried passionately as a low tapping was heard at the door, "I am waiting for the day when he will be released and come, wherever I may be, to claim me and bid me follow him, whatever may be his future. And I shall have to go—I shall have to go."

"Myra," whispered Edie, throwing her arms about her cousin's neck, "hush, pray! Pray hush! Auntie is at the door; she must not hear you talk like this. These terrible fits are only for me to hear; my own sister, pray, pray be calm."

Her touch, her kisses, had the desired effect; and as the tapping at the door was resumed, Myra sank down sobbing on a chair, and buried her flushed face in Edie's breast.



## CHAPTER XVII.

### BREAKING THE CAGE.

**N**IGHT at The Foreland—and a dark night ; the moon not due for hours, and when she rose not likely to be seen for the heavy clouds which blotted out the stars. Lights were out in the great building, which stood up by day gloomy, many-windowed, and forbidding on the huge promontory, crossed by wall and works, and with sentries between the convict establishment and the mainland. The other three sides had the waves, which washed the nearly perpendicular precipices, for warders, and it was only here and there that an active man well acquainted with the cliffs could descend to the sea, and such an acquaintanceship was not likely to be made by the wretched men marched out, fettered and guarded, to the great quarries day after day, and then carefully watched back to their cells.

At times the sentinel duty outside the building could easily be relaxed on the sea side, for the billows came thundering in, smiting the polished rocks and flying high in air with a deafening din ; but on a calm, warm, dark night, when it was possible for a boat to approach close in, a stricter watch was kept, lest one of the more hardened prisoners should contrive to elude the vigilance within the buildings and make a desperate effort to win his freedom.

But, as a rule, attempts at evasion were made when the men were marched out to the quarries, when a dash would be made during a sea fog, or a convict would crawl into some hollow among the freshly hewn stones, and lie there, hoping not to be missed till he had made good his escape.



On this particular night a young member of the warder guard stood, rifle on shoulder, looking out to sea from the mere shelf of level rock near the top of the cliff.

A great steamer was making her way down channel, and her lights shone like stars away on the black waters.

"West Indy or South America; and a Dutch boat, I should say," muttered the sentry; and he turned his eyes to where, well up under the shelter of the great promontory, the lights of several vessels showed where they lay at anchor.

"This is a miserable dog's life," muttered the man, "and I get precious sick of it, but I think I'd rather be here than there. One can feel bottom and be safe—sailors can't. That one nighest in is the little man-o'-war, I suppose, and yon's the big one. How dark it is!"

He stood there trying to pierce the blackness, out of which the anchor lights of the ships stood like stars, but he could see nothing save a faint bluish-greeny gleam now and then far below, where the phosphorescence of the sea washed gently, like so much luminous oil, over the bases of the cliffs and played among the masses of seaweed lying awash.

"How unked the sea is of a dark night. Fancy going sailing right away yonder, not knowing what you may hit upon next. Shore's good enough for me, even if it's being at Foreland convict prison, with a day out now and then."

He turned his face shoreward, looking across the bay, dotted with faint lights, to where the red lamps of the harbor shone out with their lurid glow.

"That's better," he said as he followed the curve of the shore, with the faint golden gleam sent up by the gas lamps which dotted the bow like so many bright beads strung along the shore, on and on by the line of houses facing the sea front, till they ran out for a short distance to sea, and ended in quite a cluster, out of which flashed one with a



bluish glare, whose rays cut the darkness, for it was the electric light at the end of the pier.

"Band's playing," said the man, listening intently ; but the distance across the curve to the town pier was too great, and he could make out nothing but a stray note of a cornet now and then.

"Come, play up louder, old man ; can't hear. Nothing like a bit of music now and then. That's one good in being a soldier : you do have a band, while we poor beggars have to carry a rifle without. But there, a man can drop this when he likes, and a soldier can't."

He took a turn or two up and down, and stopped again to look up the steep cliff slope running high above him from the shelf on which his duty lay, this being over one of the spots where it would be possible for a daring cragsman to get down to the sea.

"Shouldn't mind a glass of beer," he thought. "Salt in the air, I suppose. Well, I can get that by and by. Lord, what's a fellow got to grumble about ? How would it be to do one's bit inside ! Some of 'em pays pretty dear for their little games, and one can't help feeling sorry for one now and then. Bah ! lot's of 'em are best there. They'd think no more of coming behind me in the dark and chucking me into the sea than kissing their hands. Ugh !" he ejaculated, with a shudder, as he gripped his piece more tightly, and gave a sharp glance round and up above him at the black crags. "What a fool I am to think of such things, only a chap can't help it in such a lonesome place. Well, one side is safe," he muttered, with a half laugh. "So are the others, stupid. Poor devils ! Not much chance for any of them coming out for a quiet pipe to-night."

A faint note or two from the distant band on the pier floated to the warder, and he went on musing:

"Now, I dessay if I was over yonder having a smoke



and listening to that music I should think nothing of it, and be for getting back somewhere to have a bit o' supper ; but because I'm here and can't get near it every tootle of that old cornet sounds 'eavenly ; and the lights seem grand. It was just the same down at home ; there was our big old apple tree, the Gennet-Moyle, as I could get up when I liked, or knock as many down as I pleased with mother's clothes props—good apples they was, too ; but they wouldn't do—one always wanted to get over Thompson's walls to smug those old hard baking pears, which was like nibbling the knobs off the top of the bed-posts."

He laughed until his shoulders shook.

"Poor old Thompson !" he said half aloud. "Said he'd have some of us put in prison for stealing. Wonder whether some of these poor beggars began that way and then went on. Humph ! maybe. Well, they should have known better."

He continued his march up and down for a while, and then stopped once more, grounded his piece, and stood there quite invisible to anyone a few yards away. He went on thinking about the town at the head of the bay, and the music, and of how time was going ; and then his thoughts went back to the great body of dangerous criminals shut up in the huge, grim buildings, and of how much depended on the care and diligence of those in charge—a mere handful compared to those they guarded.

"Only we've got the law on our side and they haven't," he thought ; and as the thought ran through his brain he felt the blood pulsate sharply and there was a heavy throb at his heart, for there was a peculiar sound away to his right, high up the steep slope of the cliff, as if a stone had been dislodged and had slipped down a few yards before stopping in a cleft.

He stood listening intently, but the sound was not



repeated—all was still as death ; but the man's pulses had been stirred, and his heart beat in a manner that was painful.

It was not that he was particularly wanting in courage, but, shut in there by the darkness, it was impossible to keep back the thought that a desperate man who had stolen out or hidden might be lurking close by ready to spring upon him in an unguarded moment, drive him off the cliff shelf which formed his beat, and all would be over in an instant. For a fall there meant death by drowning or the fearful crash on to the rocks below.

"They shan't take me unawares," he thought, and then he hesitated as to whether he should give the alarm by firing his piece.

In an instant he had raised it and his finger was on the trigger, but he did not make its flash cut the darkness for a moment and its report run re-echoing along the cliffs.

"What for?" he said to himself ; "bring the fellows here to laugh at me because I heard a rabbit on the move. I should never hear the last of it."

He again grounded his piece, but very softly, and stood with his back to the sea, straining his eyes in the direction from whence the sound had come, but the stones that towered up were all blurred together into one black mass, and though he fancied several times over that he could make out the figure of a man half hidden by some projection, he was fain to confess directly after that it was all fancy.

"But fancy or not," he said to himself, "I don't mean to be taken on the grand hop"—and he did not stir from his position where he stood on the very edge of the cliff shelf, but kept on glancing to right and left along the stone path, and sweeping the slope in front.

Ten minutes passed like this—ten long-drawn intervals of time—and then the man threw up his rifle and stood ready, fully expecting an attack, certain now that there had



been good reason for the dislodgment of the stone. For from high up on the top of one of the ranges of prison buildings a sound rang out which sent a thrill through the watcher's nerves.

It was the alarm bell, which might mean the escape of prisoners or an attack from a deadly enemy ; but it could not be the latter, for there was no reflection of a fire.

"Now for it !" muttered the man, with his finger on the trigger, prepared for the rush of a man or men, and he thought over the formula he must utter before he fired.

"I don't want to hurt anybody," he said softly, "but no one shall drive me over without getting something first. It's that Ratcliff Highway chap at his games again. I wish they'd hang him or send him somewhere else."

And he thought of a warder who had been disabled for life, and another who was absent twelve months, both from injuries inflicted by a savage brute whom all the men feared.

Another instant and all doubts were at an end, for there was a bright flash, and directly after the heavy, reverberating roar of a gun.

"Sharp's the word !" said the man softly as, taught by training, his fingers involuntarily drew forth a loud clicking from the lock of the piece he held ; and as he stood there, breathing hard, every nerve and muscle was on the strain, for he could hear steps coming rapidly in his direction, and they must pass him—there was no other way ; and it meant a desperate attack made by men armed with hammers and bars, perhaps only stones, and on the warder's part duty and self-defense.

"Someone's number crossed out," he muttered fiercely, for there was no feeling of dread now.

Then a change came over him as, with an intense feeling of satisfaction, he grasped the fact that the measured beat of feet was that of their more disciplined men.



He challenged, and there was the reassuring response.

"Anyone been this way?" cried a sergeant breathlessly as he halted four men.

"No."

"Three of 'em got out and half killed two warders. They came along here, we think."

"Nobody been this way."

"Keep a sharp lookout, then. We're going on. Challenge, of course, but if they don't stand let them have it. They won't spare you. Ready, there; we'll go on to the next post, and come back directly."

"Stop!" said the sentry huskily; "I thought I heard a stone roll down from up yonder a few minutes ago."

"They are there, then," cried the sergeant, "safe enough. Now, then," he shouted; "the game's up, my lads. Give in. No stones, or I'll give orders to fire. Ready, there; present!"

There was a dead silence.

"Nobody could get over the cliff here," growled one of the men. "Monkeys might, perhaps."

"Silence!" cried the sergeant. "They must be there. Now, then, will you come down, or are we to pick you off?"

"Hush! What's that?"

The unmistakable rattling of stones and a scrambling sound as if someone had slipped.

"Hah! that's good enough. Now, then, is it surrender?"

Silence again, and the darkness in front blacker than ever.

"You will have it, then," cried the sergeant. "One and four, a dozen paces right and left."

The evolution was performed, and then with a man on each side of him the sergeant once more shouted to the convicts to give in.



"Hi, look out !" roared one of the warders.

"In the queen's name, surrend——"

A dull, heavy blow, and a groan were heard almost together, cutting short the sergeant's challenge, for a heavy piece of rock struck him full in the face, while a couple more blocks whizzed by the others, to fall heavily far below where they stood. Simultaneously three dark figures bounded on to the edge and made at the little group.

The attack was so sudden and direful in its results that the warders gave way right and left, while the convicts stooped, literally glided over the edge of the path, and began to descend the horribly steep cliff.

"Don't keep together," cried a hoarse voice from below. "Every man for himself now."

"Fire !" shouted one of the warders ; and almost together three rifles flashed out their contents, followed by a derisive laugh.

Then the warder who had been ordered off to the right fired, and as the shot echoed along the cliff there was a terrible cry, followed by a rush as of something falling.

"Now, then, surrender !" cried one of the warders, who was reloading rapidly, just as rapid steps were heard coming along the path.

"Where are they ?" shouted an authoritative voice as ten or a dozen more men were now halted on the shelf-like path.

"Right below here, sir. One of 'em down."

"Halt, there ! Do you hear, men ? Surrender at once ; you can't escape."

No reply, but those above could hear the scuffling noise of those descending and the rattle of a heavy stone, followed by a dull plunge.

"Your blood be on your own heads, then," said the officer who had now come up. "Once more : in the queen's name, surrender !"



No answer, but the hurried rustle of the descending fugitives.

Sharp orders were given, and then came the fatal word :  
" Fire ! "

Several rifles rattled out their deadly challenge now, and as the warders peered over into the darkness, up through the heavy smoke came a peculiar snarl, more like the cry of a savage beast than the utterance of a human throat, while directly after, sending a thrill of horror through the men who were looking down, there was the sound of the heavy plunge as of something falling from a great height into the sea.

Then silence, save that the heavy breathing of the warders was audible as they listened for the cry, " Help ! " which they expected to hear from the water when the wounded man rose to the surface, not one of the guard daring in his own mind to think upon either of the shots fired as being fatal.

At that moment there was a flash from off the sea a quarter of a mile away, and a few moments later another glare, both sending a brilliant path of light across the smooth water. And now, plainly seen in the midst of a bluish halo on the black night, there stood out the rigging and hull of a ship, with figures moving here and there ; two boats were lowered down, and directly after the water flashed and sparkled as oars were dipped, and the man-of-war cutters, with their armed crews, were rowed in toward the rocks.

By this time there were fresh arrivals on the cliff path, the firing having drawn there men bearing lanterns, and the officer in charge shouted :

" Got them ? "

" No, sir," said the first officer respectfully. " Sergeant Liss is down badly hurt with a stone, and Raddon's shoulder is hurt."



“But the prisoners, man?” cried the newcomer, evidently one high in authority.

“I’m afraid, sir——”

“The prisoners?”

“Below here somewhere, sir—two of them.”

“Yes, and the other?”

“We were obliged to fire, sir, and there was a cry, and we heard one fall into the sea.”



## CHAPTER XVIII.

### FREE !

**I**T was a slim, gray-haired, military looking man who listened to these words with the light of one of the lanterns full upon his face, which contracted into a heavy frown.

“ You challenged them—warned them well ? ”

“ Again and again, sir. It was not until they were right down here, after the sergeant had been hurt, that we fired.”

The governor, for he it was, shrugged his shoulders and gave his orders. Then four of the most active of the warders began to descend, lanterns in hand, each looking like a spark on the face of the black rock.

The task was so perilous that at the end of a few minutes the governor ordered the men to halt, while ropes were fetched, and in due time these were brought and secured to the climbers' waists, the ropes being paid out by the warders on the shelf, the light of the lanterns being now supplemented by the blue lights held in the sterns of the fast approaching cutters.

“ Ahoy, there, ashore ! ” was shouted by the officer in one of the boats ; “ men escaping ? ”

“ Yes ; three,” was shouted back. “ Row to and fro, and see if you can make out a man swimming.”

“ Right ! Swimming, indeed ! Where's he to swim to ? ” grumbled the officer ; and at a word then the boats separated, and were rowed slowly along at a short distance from the shore.

Then came a hail from below, and a man bearing one



lantern began to climb sidewise to where another had become stationary.

"Well?" from the shelf.

"One of 'em, sir."

"Mind. Wait for help and look out for treachery."

"He won't show no treachery," muttered the warder, holding the lantern over a ghastly face contorted by agony.

"Well, mate, I'd give in now."

"Yes," said the man with a groan. "I'm sick as a dog. Hold me. I shall go into the sea. Get me back. The doctor."

He said no more. His grasp of the rock to which he clung relaxed, and he began to slide down sidewise till the warder thrust his leg beneath him and grasped one arm.

"Look sharp!" he said to his companion. "Set the lantern down, and mine too."

"Can you hold him?"

"Yes; all right. Now untie the rope from round me, and make it fast under his arms."

"Where's he hurt?" said the second warder.

"Leg, I think. His things are all wet with blood. Look sharp."

The knots were untied, and as the insensible, wounded man was held up, the rope was made fast under his arms, and at the word, the unfortunate wretch was carefully hauled up.

But before he was half-way to the shelf there was a second hail from close down the water side.

"Here's another of 'em, sir."

"Hurt?"

"Yes, sir, or else shamming."

"Wait till another man gets down to you," cried the governor. "Be careful!"

The man who had given up his rope was not far above the spot where the second convict lay; and he managed to lower himself down, holding his lantern the while in his



teeth, and soon after adding its light to that of the other warder's.

"Think he's shamming?" asked the man who had found him.

The fresh comer stooped down without hesitation, in spite of the warning from above; and after looking fixedly in the convict's closely shaven face, passed his hand here and there about the prison clothes.

"Don't feel nothing," he said, "but this isn't shamming. Here, hold up, my lad. Where are you hurt?"

There was no reply, and the cleanly cut, aristocratic features of the man looked very stony and fixed.

"I don't think he's shamming, mate," whispered the warder, "but cover him with your piece; I don't want to be hurt."

It was an awkward place to use a rifle, but the warder addressed altered his position a little, and brought the muzzle of his piece to bear on the convict's breast.

"Well, you two below there," shouted the governor. "What do you make out?"

"One moment, sir. Ugh! No shamming here, mate. Feel his head."

"Take your word for it," said the other gruffly.

"Let's have your rope, then, and send him up."

"Badly hurt?" cried the governor.

"Very, sir," shouted the warder who was manipulating the rope. "Wait a minute," he continued, and, stripping off his tunic, he threw it over the injured man's head, and passed the sleeves under the rope about his chest.

"Mind what you're doing, or he'll slip away."

"He'll slip away if I do mind," muttered the warder. "Here, steady, mate; I only wanted to keep the rocks from chafing you."

For the convict had suddenly torn at the tunic; but his hands dropped again directly, word was given to haul



gently, and holding on by either side of the loop about the prisoner's breast, the warders climbed as the rope was hauled, and kept the unfortunate man's head from the rock.

This last was a slower process than the sending up of the first prisoner, but the rest of the warders were searching about still, especially down close to the edge of the sea, in the expectation of seeing the third man hiding among the rocks half covered with the long strands of the slimy fucus that fringed the tide-washed shore. And all the while the two boats made the water glisten, and the blue lights threw up the face of the rock so clearly that, unless he had found some deep, dark, cavernous niche, there was but little chance for an escaping convict to cling anywhere there unseen.

By the time the second man was taken to the shelf a fresh arrival was upon the scene in the person of the jail surgeon, who, fresh from attending sergeant and warder, made a rapid examination of the first prisoner, and then began to open a case by the light of one of the lanterns.

"Dangerous?" said the governor sharply.

"No. Bullet clean through one thigh and the other regularly plowed. Send for stretchers."

He knelt down as he spoke, and with the convict groaning piteously he rapidly plugged one of his wounds, and bandaged both.

"Now the other," he said ; and he turned to the second patient, who was lying, talking quickly, a few yards away.

Just then the governor hailed the men below.

"You must find him, my lads," he cried. "Who heard him plunge in?"

"I did, sir," came back.

"Well, then, he is ashore again somewhere, holding on by the rocks ; no man would swim out to sea with such a tide on. He would be carried right away. Keep a good look-



out, and if he's wise he will surrender. Well, doctor, this one much hurt?"

"Yes, horribly. Head crushed."

"Not by a bullet?"

"No: fall. How long are those stretchers going to be?"

"Some distance for the men to go, doctor," said the governor quickly. "You forget they were being used for the sergeant and the man."

"Poor fellows! yes," said the doctor, rapidly continuing his manipulations; "there, that is all I can do."

He rose from his knee and stood looking out at the boats below turning the water into silvery blue as port fire after port fire was burned, while others lit up the man-of-war from which the boats had come.

"I'm glad it was not a bullet," said the governor quietly, as his men below searched the rocks and shouted—now to their companions who paid out the rope, now answered hails from the boats.

"Yes; one man's enough to shoot a night," said the surgeon grimly.

"Beg pardon, sir," said a warder, coming up, lantern in hand, and saluting.

"Yes; what is it?"

"I don't think you'll find the other poor chap, sir."

"Why?"

"Blades, who was one of the men here first, and fired, says there was a shriek just before they heard the splash in the water."

"Tut—tut—tut!" ejaculated the governor. "Poor wretch! Where is Blades?"

"Here, sir," said a man who was holding one of the ropes.

"Why didn't you say this before, man?"

"Didn't like to, sir; and besides, I thought the others knew."



"One does not seem to have been enough," whispered the surgeon. "Aynsley, I did not know your men could shoot so well. Hah! the stretchers."

For lanterns were seen approaching, and directly after a party came up with the ambulance apparatus. The two convicts were lifted on and borne off along the path traversed only a short time before by their victims—one of them groaning piteously; the other lying silent and calm, gazing straight up at the black darkness, while his lips moved slightly from time to time.

"Most unfortunate! most unfortunate!" muttered the governor as soon as he was left alone with his subordinates. "Poor, blind fools! how they rush upon their fate! Well," he shouted, "see him?"

"No, sir. Boats are coming back, sir."

This was plain enough, and a few minutes later both rowed up in close with fresh blue lights illuminating the scene.

"Ahoy! Who's up yonder?" shouted a naval officer.

"I am," cried the governor.

"Oh, you, Sir William! Well, sir, I'll keep my men on if you like, but no swimmer could have got to shore from hereabouts. If there is a man living he must be somewhere on these rocks."

"My men say they have searched thoroughly," said the governor. "Every ledge and crack is well known. There can be no one here."

"Shall we patrol the place a little longer?"

The governor was silent for a few moments, and then, feeling that all possible had been done, he gave the word for the search to be given up, but sent half a dozen men to patrol the road leading to the mainland, feeling all the while that it was a hopeless task.

By this time the last man had climbed up from the dangerous cliff side, the ropes were coiled, and the party



marched off toward the prison—the governor last—leaving the sentinel warder to his beat with the company of another man.

These two stood in silence till the footsteps had died out on the rocky path and the last blue light had ceased to send golden drops into the hissing water as the boats made for the man-of-war.

“Black night’s work this, Jem,” said the companion sentry. “Two of ’em gone and three wounded.”

“No, no ; not so bad as that.”

“Yes, bad as that. Yon chap on the stretcher won’t see to-morrow morning, and that other poor chap who shrieked when we fired went into the water like a stone. It was your shot did that.”

“Ugh ! I hope not,” said the warder, with a shudder. “Seems to me time I tried another way of getting my bread and cheese. Hark !”

“What at ?”

“That. Someone hailed off the water. Quite low and faint, like a man going down.”

The clouds were lifting slowly in the east, and the misty, blurred face of the moon began to show in the east, over the brimming water’s rim.



## CHAPTER XIX.

### ALMOST BY ACCIDENT.

**T**IME had crept on since the return of the Jerrolds, and by degrees the pain of the meeting between Myra and Stratton grew less, and the wound made that day began to heal.

"I'm sorry for him," Guest would say to himself ; "but I can't keep away because he is unhappy."

So he visited at the admiral's, where he always found a warm welcome, but made little progress with Edie, who seemed to have grown cold.

Then, too, he met the cousins at Miss Jerrold's, and it naturally came about that one evening, after a good deal of persuasion, Stratton became his companion.

Myra was there that night, and once more their hands were clasped, while Stratton felt that it was no longer the girl into whose eyes he looked, but the quiet, thoughtful woman who had suffered in the struggle of life, and that he must banish all hope of a nearer tie than that of friendship.

For whatever Myra may have held hidden in her secret heart she was the calm, self-contained friend to her aunt's guest. Ready to sit and talk with him of current topics and their travels ; to play or sing if asked ; but Stratton always left the house with the feeling that unconsciously Myra had gravely impressed upon him the fact that she was James Barron's wife, and that she would never seek to rid herself of that tie.

"And I must accept that position." Stratton would say despairingly, after one of the meetings which followed ;



and then he would make a vow never to meet Myra again, for the penance was too painful to be borne.

The result was that the very next day after making one of these vows he received a letter from Edie, asking him, at her uncle's wish, to dinner in Bourne Square.

For the admiral had said to Edie, on hearing that they had met Stratton at her aunt's :

"Let bygones be bygones. I don't see why we should not all be friends again. I always liked the boy. He can talk well about scientific things without boring you. Ask him to dinner."

"Uncle wants him to come and wean poor Myra from that terrible business."

But Edie was wrong, for after approaching his daughter several times on the question of the possibility of obtaining a divorce, Myra had stopped the admiral so decidedly that he had been ready to believe she must have cared for Barron after all.

"First man who ever told her he loved her," the old man said to himself, "so, of course, she can't help feeling a kind of liking for him. But suppose he comes out on ticket-of-leave, don't they call it? And what if he comes here? Bah! I'll shoot him before he shall have her. That would bring Myra to book, too. That's a card I must play—possibility of his coming back. She'll give in, then. I must hear what a lawyer says."

But, in his unbusinesslike way, Sir Mark did nothing. Home was calm and pleasant again, and he had his little dinners, and his friends ; and to him the existence of James Barron, alias Dale, at The Foreland became less and less clear. He was buried, as it were, in a living tomb, and there was no need to think of him for years.

Stratton came again and again for dinner, and now and then dropped in of an evening. Always against his will, he told himself ; but the attraction was strong enough to



draw him there. It was plain, too, that Myra's eyes brightened when he entered, but he felt that it was only to see her father's friend.

Then came one autumn night when, after a long and busy day, Stratton made up his mind to go to Bourne Square, undid it, made up his mind again, once more undid it, and determined that he would no longer play the moth round the bright candle.

He had dressed, and, throwing off his light coat and crush hat, he went out of his rooms and along the landing to Brettison's.

"I'll go and talk botany," he said. "Life is too valuable to waste upon a heartless woman."

He knocked ; no answer. Again ; no reply.

"Gone out," he said. "What shall I do?"

Stratton hesitated for a few moments, and then went and fetched his hat and coat, descended, took a cab, and ordered the man to drive to Guest's, in Gray's Inn.

"Better have stopped at home," muttered Stratton ; "he will talk about nothing else but Bourne Square." But he was wrong. Guest was out, so descending into the square, and walking out into Holborn, Stratton took another cab.

"Where to, sir?"

"Bourne Square."

Stratton sank back in his seat perfectly convinced that he had said Benchers' Inn, and he started out of a reverie when the cab stopped at the admiral's door.

"Fate," he muttered. "It was no doing of mine." Andrews admitted him as a matter of course, and led the way to the drawing room, where he announced his name.

Myra started from a couch, where she had been sitting alone, dreaming ; and as Stratton advanced his pulses began to beat heavily, for never had the woman he idolized looked so beautiful as then.

There was a faint flush in her soft, creamy cheeks, the



trace of emotion in her heaving bosom, as she greeted him consciously ; for she had been sitting alone, thinking of him and his proposal to her father, and the next minute the door had been opened, and he stood before her.

"It is almost by accident that I am here," he said, in a low voice full of emotion, which he vainly strove to control. "Your cousin ? The admiral ?"

"Did you not know ?" said Myra in a voice as deep and tremulous as his own. "Mr. Guest came with tickets for the opera. He knew my father liked the one played to-night—'Faust.'"

"Indeed !" said Stratton huskily.

"He goes for the sake of the great scene of the return of the men from the war. I think he would never tire of hearing that grand march."

She left the couch, conscious of a strange feeling of agitation, and, crossing to the piano, seated herself, and began to play softly the second strain in the spirit-stirring composition, gradually gliding into the jewel song quite unconsciously, and with trembling fingers. Then she awoke to the fact that Stratton had followed her to the instrument, against which he leaned, with the tones thrilling his nerves, tones set vibrating by the touch of hands that he would have given worlds to clasp in his own, while he poured forth the words struggling for exit.

"It is fate," he said to himself, as he stood there gazing down at the beautiful head with its glossy hair, the curve of the creamy neck, and the arms and hands whiter than the ivory over which they strayed.

So sudden—so wondrous. The only thing in his thoughts had been that he might be near her for a time, and hear her words, while now they were alone in the soft, dim light of the drawing room, and the touch of her fingers on those keys sent that dreamy, sensuous, glorious music thrilling through every fiber of his body. Friend ? How



could he be friend ? He loved her passionately, and, cold as she might ever be, however she might trample upon his feelings, she must always be the same to him—his ideal—his love—the only woman in the world who could ever stir his pulses.

And so silent now—so beautiful ? If she had spoken in her customary formal, friendly way, it would have broken the spell. But she could not. The chain was as fast round her at that moment, though she longed to speak.

She could not, for she knew how he loved her ; how his touch stirred each pulse ; that this man was all in all to her—the one she loved, and she could not turn and flee.

At last, by a tremendous effort, she raised her eyes to his to speak indifferently and break through this horrible feeling of dread and lassitude, but as their eyes met, her hands dropped from the keys, as, with a passionate cry, he took a step forward, caught her to his breast, and she lay for the moment trembling there, and felt his lips pressed to her in a wild, passionate kiss.

“ Myra ! ” he panted ; “ all that must be as a dream. You are not his. It is impossible. I love you—my own ! my own ! ”

His words thrilled her, but their import roused in her as well those terrible thoughts of the tie which bound her ; and, with a cry of anger and despair, she thrust him away.

“ Go ! ” she cried ; “ it is an insult. You must be mad.”

Then, with the calm majesty of an injured woman proud of her honor and her state, she said coldly, as she pointed to the door :

“ Mr. Stratton, you have taken a cruel advantage of my loneliness here. I am Mr. Barron’s wife. Go, sir. We are friends no longer and can never meet again.”



## CHAPTER XX.

### THE MORNING PAPER.

**N**O one by any stretch of the imagination could have called the admiral a good reader. In fact, a person might very well have been considered to be strictly within the limits of truth if he had declared the old officer to be the worst reader he ever heard. But so it was, from the crookedness of human nature, that he always made a point of reading every piece of news in the paper which he considered interesting, aloud, for the benefit of those with him at the breakfast table.

Matters happen strangely quite as frequently as they go on in the regular groove of routine, and hence it happened, one morning at breakfast, that is to say, on the morning after the tragedy at the convict prison, that Sir Mark put on his gold spectacles as soon as he had finished his eggs and bacon and one cup of coffee, and, taking the freshly aired paper, opened it with a good deal of rustling noise, and coughed.

Edie looked across at her cousin with a mischievous smile, but Myra was gazing thoughtfully before her, and the glance missed its mark.

“Hum ! ha ! ” growled Sir Mark. “ ‘ London, South, and Channel. Same as number three.’ Confound number three ! Who wants to refer to that ? Oh, here we are : ‘ Light winds, shifting to east. Fine generally.’ Climate’s improving, girls. More coffee, Myra. Pass my cup, Edie, dear.”

He skimmed over the summary, and then turned to the police cases, found nothing particular, and went on to the sessions, stopping to refresh himself from time to time,



while Edie wondered what her cousin's thoughts might be.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the admiral suddenly; "how singular! I must read you this, girls. Here's another forgery of foreign banknotes."

The click of Myra's teacup as she suddenly set it down made the admiral drop the paper and read in his child's blank face the terrible slip he had made.

"O Myra, my darling!" he cried apologetically; "I am so sorry;" and he turned to Edie, who looked daggers.

"It is nothing, papa," said Myra coldly, as she tried hard to master her emotion.

"But it is something, my dear. I wouldn't have said a word only I caught sight of Percy Guest's name as junior for the defense."

It was Edie's turn now to look startled, and Sir Mark hurriedly fixed upon her to become the scapegoat for his awkward allusion, and divert Myra's attention.

"Can't congratulate the prisoner upon his counsel," he said. "The man's too young and inexperienced. Only the other day a mere student. It's like putting a midshipman as second in command of an ironclad."

Edie's eyes now seemed to dart flames, and she looked up boldly at her uncle.

"Oh, yes," he said, "I mean it. Very nice fellow, Percy Guest, in a social way, but I should be sorry to trust an important case with him. Here, I'll read it, and see what it's all about. No; never mind, I know [you] girls don't care about law."

The morning meal had been commenced cheerfully. There was sunshine without and at the table, Edie had thought how bright and well her cousin looked, and augured pleasant times of the future.

"If she could only feel herself free," was her constant thought when Myra gave way to some fit of despondency.



"I'm sure that she loves Malcolm Stratton, and what is the good of a stupid old law if all it does is to make people uncomfortable. I wish I knew the Archbishop of Canterbury or the judge of the Court of Divorce, or whoever it is settles those things. I'd soon make them see matters in a different light. Poor Myra would be obedient then, and there'd be an end of all this moping. I believe she delights in making herself miserable."

[E] It was just when Edie had reached this point and she was stirring her tea, and thinking how easily she could settle matters if she were at the head of affairs, so as to make everybody happy, herself included, when her uncle made his malapropos remarks.

There was no more sunshine in the dining room after that. Myra looked cold and pale, the admiral was uncomfortable behind the paper, in which he enveloped himself as in a cloud, from which came a hand at intervals to feel about the table in an absurd way for toast or his coffee cup, which was twice over nearly overturned.

Then he became visible for a moment or two as he turned the paper, but it closed him in again, and from behind it there came, now and then, a fidgeting nervous cough, which was as annoying to the utterer as to those who listened.

"Going out to-day, girls?" asked Sir Mark at last, but without removing the paper.

"Yes, uncle," said Edie sharply, for her cousin had given her an imploring look, and the girl could see that Myra was greatly agitated still; "the carriage is coming round at two. Shall we drop you at the club?"

"Great Heavens!" ejaculated the old man in a tone which startled both his hearers, and as if expectant from some premonition, Myra thrust back her chair, and sat gazing at the paper wildly.

"What is it, uncle?" cried Edie.

"Eh? Oh, nothing, my dear," said Sir Mark con-



fusedly, as he rustled the paper and hurriedly turned it. "More horrors. These editors seem to revel in them, or the public do. So shocking ; no sooner is one at an end, than another begins."

He had screened his face again as quickly as he could, for he was a miserable dissembler, and Edie and Myra exchanged glances. Then, rising slowly with her hand pressed to her breast, Myra made as if she would go to the other side of the table, but her strength failed her, and as her father cleared his throat with a sonorous cough, she clung to the edge, crumpling up the white cloth in her damp fingers.

Edie rose too, but throwing up her head, Myra motioned her back imperiously, and stood for a few moments with her lips parted and eyes dilated, gazing at the paper, as if devouring its contents, while from behind it came the admiral's voice with forced carelessness.

"For my part," he said, with a clumsy effort to hide his own emotion, "I am beginning to think that the ordinary daily newspapers are unsuitable reading for young ladies, who had better keep to the magazines and journals specially devoted to their wants."

There was no word spoken in return, and after another cough, the old man continued :

"What was that you said about dropping me at the club ? By all means, yes. My leg was rather bad in the night. Don't care so much about walking as I used."

Still there was no reply, and, as if struck by the notion that he had been left alone in the room, Sir Mark coughed again nervously, and slowly moved himself in his chair, to turn the paper slightly aside, and, as if by accident, so that he could see beyond one side.

He sat there the next moment petrified, and staring at his daughter's wildly excited face, for, resting one hand on the table, she was leaning toward him, her hand extended to



take the paper, and her eyes questioning his, while Edie, looking terribly agitated, was also leaning forward as if to restrain her cousin.

Sir Mark's lips parted and moved, but he made no sound. Then recovering himself, he hastily closed the paper, doubled it over again, and rose from his chair.

"Myra, my darling!" he cried, "are you ill?"

Her lips now moved in turn, but without a sound at first; then she threw back her head, and her eyes grew more dilated as she cried hoarsely:

"That paper—there is news—something about my husband."

"Edie, ring! She is ill," cried Sir Mark.

"No, stop!" cried Myra. "I am not a child now, father. I tell you that there is news in that paper about my husband. Give it to me. I will see."

Sir Mark was as agitated now as his child, and with a hurried gesture, perfectly natural under the circumstances, he thrust the paper behind him. "No, no, my child," he stammered, with his florid face growing mottled and strange.

"I say there is, father, and you are deceiving me."

"Well, yes, a little, my darling," he said hastily. "A little. Not for your ears, dear. Another time when you are cool and calm, you know. Edie, my dear, come to her; talk to her. Myra, my child, leave it to me."

Myra's hand went to her throat as if she were stifling, but once more she forced back her emotion.

"Something about—the prison—my husband?"

"Yes, yes, my dear. Nothing so very particular. Now do—do leave it to me, and try to be calm. You frighten me. There, there, my pet," he continued, trying to take her hand; "go to your room for a bit with Edie, and—yes, yes, lie down."

"Give me the paper," she said hoarsely.



"No, no, I cannot, indeed, my dear."

"Ah!" cried the agitated girl wildly. "I know—they have set him free?"

Sir Mark glanced at his niece, and then passed his hand over his beaded forehead.

"Yes, yes, my dear," he faltered; "he is free."

"Ah! and he will come here and claim me, and then——"

She reeled as if to fall, but her force of will was too great, and she mastered her emotion again, stepped forward, and seized the paper, her senses swimming as she turned it again and again, till the large type of the telegram caught her attention.

Then she closed her eyes for a few moments, drew a long breath, and they saw her compress her lips and read without a tremor:

#### DARING ATTEMPTED ESCAPE.

##### SERIOUS AFFRAY.

Our correspondent at Grey Cliff telegraphs of a desperate attempt made by three of the convicts at The Foreland last night about eight o'clock. By some means they managed to elude the vigilance of the warders after the cells had been visited and lights were out, reached the yard, and scaled the lofty wall. Then, favored by the darkness of the night, they threaded their way among the sentries, and reached the cliffs of the dangerous rocky coast, where, their evasion having been discovered, they were brought to bay by a party of the armed warders. In the affray which ensued two of the warders were dangerously wounded with stones, and the convicts were making their way down the cliffs to the sea when orders were given to fire. One of the men was shot down, while, in the desperate attempts to escape recapture, the others went headlong down the almost perpendicular precipice which guards the eastern side of The Foreland.

Upon the warders descending with ropes, two of the men were brought up, one with a shot through the leg, the other suffering from a badly fractured skull, while, in spite of vigorous search by the boats of H. M. S. *Merlin*, the body of the third man, which had been heard to plunge into the sea, was not recovered. We regret to add that the man injured by his fall expired in the ambulance on the way back to the prison. He was the notorious convict Barron, or Dale, sentenced to seven years'



penal servitude, about a twelvemonth ago, for the daring fraud upon the Russian government by the issue of forged ruble notes.

The paper fell from Myra's hands as she stood there motionless, and apparently unmoved by the tidings she had read. Then turning slowly, she held out her hand to Edie, who obeyed the imploring look in her eyes, and led her from the dining room to her own chamber without a word.

"Myra," she whispered then, and she pressed closely toward her cousin, whose lips now parted, and she heard almost like a sigh :

"Free—free !"

"Talk to me, dear, talk to me," whispered Edie. "It frightens me when you look like that."

Myra turned to her, caught her cousin to her breast, and kissed her rapidly twice. Then, thrusting her away, she whispered faintly :

"Go now—go, dear. I can bear no more ;" and when, a few moments later, Edie looked back from the door she was about to close, Myra was in the act of sinking upon her knees by the bedside, where she buried her face in her hands.

But hardly had the door closed when she sprang to her feet, and hurried across to shoot the bolt, and then stand with her hands to her head, and starting eyes, picturing in imagination the scene of the past night. The darkness and James Barron—her husband—the man who had haunted her night and day in connection with the hour when he would come back and claim her, not at the end of seven years, but earlier, released before his time—that man—while she sat below in her room at the piano—yes, she recalled vividly every minute of the previous night—she sat playing the melodies of old ballads, favorites of her father, with Percy Guest talking to Edie, and at that time this man was fighting to escape—this man, her horror. And had he succeeded he would have come there.

She shuddered as, from the brief description of the



struggle, she saw him trying to descend the rocky face of the cliff, stumble when shots were fired, and fall headlong upon the cruel stones.

It was horrible—too horrible to bear ; and yet she felt obliged to dwell upon it all, and go over it again and again, shuddering at the pictures her active brain evoked till the agony was maddening.

Then, to make her horror culminate, doubt stepped in to ask her, as if in an insidious whisper, whether she could believe it to be all true, and not some reporter's error.

She felt as if she were withering beneath some cold mental blast, and in spite of the horror, her hopes and dreams, which would have place, shrank back again. For it might be a mistake. Some other wretched man had striven to escape, and in the hurry and darkness had been mistaken for her husband.

But hope came again directly, and while shuddering at the thoughts, she recalled how explicit it had all been. There could be no mistake. She was wife no longer—tied no more by those hated bonds to a wretched adventurer—a forger—whose sole aim had been to get her father's money—she was free, and Malcolm Stratton had told her——

She shuddered again at the horror of dwelling upon such thoughts at a moment when her ears were stunned by the news of death ; but the thoughts were imperious. She had never loved this man, and the ceremony had only been performed under misapprehension. Once more she was free—free to follow the bent of her affections—free to give herself to the man she knew she loved.

What had Malcolm Stratton said—what had he said ?

A mist had been gathering about her mental vision, and she staggered toward her bedside, once more to sink down and bury her burning face in her hands, for her emotion was greater than she could bear.



## CHAPTER XXI.

“SILENCE GIVES CONSENT.”

“OH, it's you two again, is it?” said Miss Jerrold, in a tone of voice which might have been borrowed from her brother, as Stratton and Guest were shown up into her pretty little drawing room, where she sat ready to preside over her china tea tray with its quaint Sèvres cups and saucers and parcel gilt apostle spoons, while a tall stand was on her left with its bronze kettle humming and whispering, and uttering a pleasant coo now and then, as it felt the warm kisses of the spirit lamp.

Stratton's brows contracted and a look of resentment darted from his eyes as he stopped short, but Guest laughed and said airily :

“Yes ; it is your humble servant once again.”

“Well, and what do you want ?”

“Hear that, Stratton?” said Guest. “A lady sends you her cards, ‘At home, Thursday, four to six ;’ we go to the expense of new lavender kids—no, come what may, I will be truthful, mine are only freshly cleaned—and new hats—no, truth shall prevail ! a gloss over from the hatter's iron—drag ourselves all this way west to pay our devoirs—to drink tea out of thimbles, and eat slices of butter thinly sprinkled with bread crumbs, and the lady says, ‘What do you want ?’”

“Of course I do. There, sit down, both of you, and, Malcolm Stratton, don't put on that wicked, melodramatic frown ; it does not become you. You're a pair of impostors. Think I'm blind ? You don't come here to call upon a poor old woman like—— Quick, Percy, my dear boy ! Blow it out ; we shall have the room in a blaze.”



"No, no, be cool," said Guest, and he made for the spirit kettle, whose lamp had become overheated, and was sending up quite a volume of flame. But Stratton was nearer, and taking out his handkerchief, he turned it into a pad, dabbed it on the lamp, and the light was smothered.

"Oh, dear me!" sighed Miss Jerrold in tones full of relief, "now, that was very clever. I do like presence of mind. Sugar, Mr. Stratton?"

He bowed stiffly.

"Haven't burned yourself, have you, my dear?"

"Oh, no; my glove protected my hand," said Stratton, looking at the stiff, formal, handsome old body; half amused, half pleased, by the maternal "my dear."

"Ah, now you're smiling at me," she said quickly. "Sugar, Percy?"

"A good deal, please, to take the taste of your harsh words out of my mouth."

"There, then—two lumps. I know you take sugar, Malcolm Stratton, and cream. Well, my dear, I'm obliged to speak out; for you really are a pair of impostors, and I cannot have my house made a meeting place for would-be lovers. There—there—there, Mr. Stratton, don't pray turn like that, and look as if you were going to rush away. Mine is a very delicate position, and I know my brother will be taking me to task some day about all this. Now, do take my advice; and give it all up—— Percy Guest, if you break that cup I'll never forgive you. It cannot be matched."

"Would you advise us to go and try our fortunes in Australia, Miss Jerrold?" said Guest quietly, as he replaced the tiny cup in the middle of its saucer, after nearly sending it on the carpet.

"No, I would not, you stupid boy. There, I don't mean you at all. I dare say Edie will be silly enough to let you wheedle her into matrimony some day—a goose."

Guest touched his breast.



"You? No," said the lady sharply, "Edie. But you two are nobodies. I was thinking about Mr. Stratton, here. Now, don't you think, my dear, you had better give it all up?"

She held out her hand with a look of gentle sympathy to him, and he caught it and kissed it.

"Do you think I ever could?" he said, in a low voice, while Guest began to display great interest in the painting of the teacup.

"No, I suppose not," said Miss Jerrold, with a sigh. "It's very sad, you see, poor girl, she's going through a curious morbid phase which has completely changed her. All that time she had her ideas that it was her duty to wait and suffer; and I do honestly believe that if that man had behaved, himself, been released on a ticket of—ticket of—what do they call those tickets, Percy?"

"Leave," said the young barrister gravely.

"Yes; of course—she would have considered it her duty to go to him if he had come to claim her; and then died of misery and despair in a month."

"Had we not better change the conversation, Miss Jerrold?" said Stratton quietly.

"Yes, of course. I'm a very stupid old woman, I suppose; but Myra does worry me a great deal. One moment, and I've done, and I suppose things must take their course. But all this treating herself as a widow and—there—there—there—I have done. I suppose I need not tell you they are coming here to-day?"

"I did hope to see Miss——"

"Hush! Don't call her that, my dear. It must be Mrs. Barron, or she will consider herself insulted. Ah, she's a strange girl, Mr. Stratton, but we can't help liking her all the same, can we?"

She held out her hand to him with a pleasant smile and a nod; and Guest saw his friend's eyes brighten, and then



noted his passionate, eager look, as there was a ring and knock.

But the ladies who came up were strangers ; and it was not until quite the last that Myra and her cousin arrived, the former in black, and with a calm, resigned look in her pale face, which had grown very thoughtful and dreamy during the six months which had elapsed since that morning at breakfast, when the news came of James Dale's tragic end.

And now her eyes softened as she greeted Stratton, and she sat talking to him in a quiet, subdued way, till the gentlemen took their leave, and made their way back to Benchers' Inn.

Hardly a word was spoken till they were in Stratton's room, where Guest threw his hat and umbrella down impatiently, walked straight to the door on the left of the fireplace, opened it, went in, and returned with a cigar box, which he set down, and then went back to fetch out the spirit stand and a siphon from another shelf, while, dreamy looking and thoughtful, Stratton sat back in an easy-chair watching his friend's free and easy, quite at home ways, but thinking the while of Myra.

" Might have troubled yourself to get the glasses," said Guest ill-humoredly, as he fetched a couple of tall, green Venice cups from a cabinet, poured out some whisky, frothed it up from the siphon, and drank.

" That's better," he said, with a sigh of satisfaction. " Aren't you going to have one ? "

" Presently."

" Presently ? Bah ! It's always presently with you. I'm tired of presently. Edie would say ' Yes,' directly, and I could get Aunt Jerrold to coax the old man round if he wanted coaxing. But it's always the same. Look here ; if you don't keep your cigars somewhere else, and not on a shelf over that damp bath, I won't smoke 'em. Hardly get



'em to light. Here," he continued, thrusting a cigar and a match-box into Stratton's hands, "do smoke and talk, you give a fellow the blues with your dismal looks."

"I'm very sorry, old fellow," said Stratton, lighting the cigar. "I am not dismal. I feel very happy and contented."

"Then you're easily satisfied," cried Guest.

"Yes ; because I hope and believe that if I am patient, my time will come."

"Not it. It's too bad of Myra."

"No ; I would not have her change," said Stratton dreamily. "It is a hard and long probation, but I can wait, and I love her all the more dearly for her true womanly behavior. There, hold your tongue, you miserable, selfish reviler of one whom in your heart you look up to as a pattern of womanhood. The joy would be almost greater than I could bear if she said 'Yes' ; but she is right, and I will patiently wait, for some day the time will come."

"There you go again. Presently. It's all very well for you with your calm worship of your ideal woman, and your high-falutin talk about womanhood, etcetera, but I love my little Edie in a non-æsthetic, Christianlike, manly way ; and it's maddening to be always kept off by the little thing with, 'No, not till I see poor Myra happy. Then, perhaps, you may begin to talk.' Perhaps and presently make poor food for a fellow like me."

Stratton smiled at him gravely.

"That's right—laugh at me. Tell you what, Mal, you're a poor lover. Why don't you ask her plump and plain?"

Stratton made no reply but sat back smoking, and his friend said no more for a time. At last, quietly :

"Not such a bad cigar after all, Mal."

Stratton did not reply for a few moments. Then, in a low voice, full of emotion :

"Percy, lad, you must bear with me : it is all too deep



for words. If we could change places you would do as I do. Speak to her? pray to her? Have I not done all this till now when her eyes gaze in mine with their gentle, pleading calm, and say to me—'Bear with me; be patient. If you love me, give me time till all these sorrows of the past have grown blurred and faint with distance.' Guest, old fellow, she gives me no hope. There is no verbal promise, but there is a something in her gentle, compassionate look which says to me—'Wait; if ever I can forget the past—if ever I marry man—it will be you.' "

There was a deep silence in the room, and faintly heard came the roar of the great city street.

Stratton was the first to break the silence by saying softly to himself :

"Yes; wait: the time will come."

Again the silence was broken, this time by a strange hurrying, rustling sound behind the wainscot, followed by a dull thud.

"What's that?" said Guest sharply.

"That? Oh, only the rats. There are plenty in this old house."

"Ugh! Brutes."

"They only have runs behind the paneling. They never come into the rooms."

There was another silence before Guest spoke.

"Mal, old chap," he said, "I'm a miserable, impatient beast. You are quite right; I'm in my ordinary senses once more. Edie speaks just as you do, and she's as wise a little thing as ever stepped. We must wait, old man; we must wait."

Malcolm Stratton waited till one evening, when fortune favored him for the moment once again. It was by accident that he found Myra alone. He had heard the tones of the piano as he went up to the drawing room in Bourne Square, and his heart had begun to beat wildly and then its



pulsations grew to throbs and bounds, as he went in, to find her alone and playing softly in the half light.

She did not cease, but her fingers strayed on over the keys, and once more as his arm rested upon the piano, the chords thrilled through his very being; and when, without a word, his hands were outstretched to take her to his breast, she sank upon it with a sigh of relief. At that moment steps were heard upon the landing, and Edie and Miss Jerróld entered the room dressed to go to some concert, Sir Mark following directly after, from the dining room, with Guest.

Myra did not shrink from Stratton till all had seen what had taken place. Then, gravely crossing to her father, she laid her hands together upon his breast, while he waited for her to speak.

The words came at last :

“Father, dear, Malcolm has asked me to be his wife.”

Sir Mark drew her tightly to him, and held out his hand to Stratton.

“Soon, dear, very soon, but it must be very quiet, and not from here.”

“Anything, my darling, to see you happy once again.”

The butler just then brought in a lamp, and they could see the love light beaming from her eyes.



## CHAPTER XXII.

### AT THE SILENT DOOR.

**E**VEN as Percy Guest rushed at his friend's door to bring one foot against the lock with all his might, he felt the futility of the proceeding. For he knew how solid the old oak outer panels had been made; but he did not pause, and as his foot struck against it there was a dull sound—nothing more.

Guest drew back again, fully impressed by the hopelessness of his proceedings, for the outer door opened toward him, and the effect of his next thrust was only to drive it against the jamb.

He was recoiling again, with his muscles quivering from the violence of his efforts, when Miss Jerrold caught his arm.

“Mr. Guest,” she said firmly, “this is madness. You will bring a crowd of people about us, and only workmen could open that door.”

Guest hesitated a moment or two.

“Stop!” he said. “His friend, Mr. Brettison, is in the next chambers, perhaps. I’ll go and see.”

“Come, Rebecca,” said the admiral scornfully; “we have no business here.”

He held out his arm, but his sister thrust it away.

“Yes; we have business here,” she said. “If, as Mr. Guest suspects, some accident has befallen Malcolm Stratton, would you care to meet Myra without having been there?”

She whispered this to her brother while Guest had gone to Brettison’s door, at which he knocked sharply.



The admiral turned fiercely upon his sister, but she did not shrink.

"You know it's right," she said. "Be reasonable, Mark. Malcolm Stratton could not have insulted us all like this."

"I can't make him hear," said Guest, after a second sharp summons at Brettison's door. "I must fetch up a carpenter and make him force open this door."

"You have no right to proceed to such violent measures, Mr. Guest."

"Then I shall assume the right, sir. I believe that my friend lies behind that door wounded or murdered for the sake of the money he had ready for his wedding trip, and do you think I am going to stand on punctilio at a time like this?"

Miss Jerrold looked very white and faint as she said quietly :

"He is quite right, Mark."

"Get workmen, then, in Heaven's name, sir, or the police."

Guest took a step toward the stairs, but turned again.

"I don't like the *exposé*, sir," he said sharply. "There might be reasons why I should repent going."

"But you must have that door opened at once," cried Sir Mark, now once more growing excited, as if Guest's manner were contagious.

Guest drew his hand over the door in search of a hold to try and drag it toward him, ending by thrusting it in by the letter slit and giving it a vigorous shake.

He withdrew it, shaking his head, and paused, for steps were heard. But they passed the doorway at the bottom of the building and died away, while, as he listened, all seemed to be silent upstairs and down.

"We must have a carpenter," he said aloud ; and, once more placing his ear to the letter slit, he listened, and then came away to where Sir Mark stood.



"I'm certain I heard breathing within there," he whispered. "Someone is listening, and I'm sure there is something wrong; but I don't like to leave you here alone, Sir Mark."

"Why?"

"In case some scoundrel should make a sudden rush out and escape."

"Fetch a policeman," said Sir Mark sturdily. "Let him try it while you are gone."

At that moment, Guest uttered an eager cry, and thrust his hand into his pocket.

"I'd forgotten that," he said, in answer to Miss Jerrold's inquiring look; "and I don't know now that it will fit."

He had taken out his latchkey on the chance of that which fitted the lock of one set of chambers fitting that of another, and, thrusting it into the keyhole, he was in the act of turning it when, as if someone had been listening to every word and act, a bolt was suddenly shot back, and the door thrown open against Guest's chest. He started back in astonishment, for there, in the dark opening, stood Malcolm Stratton, his face of a sickly sallow, a strange look in his eyes, and a general aspect of his having suddenly turned ten years older, startling all present.

"What do you want?" he said harshly.

The question was so sudden that Guest was stunned into muteness, but the admiral stepped forward fiercely.

"You—you despicable scoundrel!" he roared; and as Stratton stepped back the old man followed him quickly into the room, and caught him by the throat.

"Mark! Mark!" cried Miss Jerrold, following to seize her brother's arm, while Guest, relieved beyond measure at finding his friend in the flesh, instead of his murderer, hurriedly entered and closed the outer door.

"Stand aside, woman!" cried the admiral, fiercely wresting himself free in ungovernable rage on seeing the



man who had caused the morning's trouble standing there unharmed. The fact of Stratton being uninjured and making so insulting a demand half maddened him, and, seizing his collar, he was bearing him back, when Guest interposed, and separated them.

"This will do no good, Sir Mark," he cried. "For everybody's sake, sir, be calm."

"Calm!" roared the old sailor furiously.

"Yes, Mark, calm," whispered his sister, clinging to him firmly. "Is it the act of an officer and a gentleman to behave like this?"

"You don't know—you cannot feel as I do," he raged.

"For Myra's sake," whispered Miss Jerrold quickly; and the old man made an effort and calmed down.

"Let him explain then. Let him say what it means. A public insult. To be degraded like this. And after what is past."

Meanwhile Stratton was looking wildly about him. The sweat stood in great drops upon his haggard face, and he trembled violently, though it was apparent to his friend that he was fighting hard to be composed.

Guest turned to Sir Mark.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "There must, as I have said, be good reasons for poor Stratton's actions. Pray be patient with him. You see, sir—you see, Miss Jerrold, he is ill and suffering. Now, Stratton, for Heaven's sake speak out. You must explain. Tell Sir Mark what it is."

"Take them away," said Stratton in a hoarse whisper; "take them away."

"Yes, yes, but say something. What is it—some sudden attack? Come, man, don't look at me in that ghastly way; are you ill?"

"No—no. I don't know," faltered Stratton.

"Then you must have some explanation to make."



"No—no. None. Go!"

"Mark—my dear brother," whispered Miss Jerrold.

"Flesh and blood can't stand it, girl," he panted, with the veins in his temples purple; and snatching himself away, he thrust Guest aside and once more seized Stratton—this time by the arms.

"Now, sir," he said hoarsely, "I know I ought to leave you in contempt for your cursed shilly-shallying, pusillanimous conduct, but with my poor child's agonized past before me, I can't behave as a polished gentleman should."

Stratton glared at him in silence, with the pallor increasing, and his face assuming a bluish-gray tinge.

"I came here believing—no, trying to believe—that you had been taken ill; that there was good reason for my child being once more exposed to a cruel public shame that must make her the byword of society. I ask you for an explanation, and in this cursedly cool way you say you have none to offer. You are not ill; you have not, as we feared, been attacked for your money, for there it lies on the table. There is nothing wrong, then, with you, and—good God! what's this?"

He started away in horror, for the hand he had in his anger shifted to Stratton's shoulder was wet, and, as he held it out, Miss Jerrold uttered a faint cry, for it was red with blood; and, released from the fierce grasp which had held him up, Stratton swayed forward, reeled, and fell with a crash on to the carpet.

"He's hurt. Wounded," cried Guest, dropping on one knee by his friend's side, but only to start up and dash into the adjoining room, to come back directly with basin, sponge, and water.

"D—n!" raged the admiral, "what a brutal temper I have. Poor lad! poor lad! Fetch a doctor, Guest. No. That's right, sponge his temples, 'Becca. Good girl.



Don't fetch a doctor yet, Guest. I am a bit of a quack. Let me see."

He went behind the prostrate man, who lay perfectly insensible, and kept on talking hurriedly as he took out a penknife and used it freely to get at the injury in the shoulder.

"Why didn't he speak? You were right, then, Guest. Some scoundrel has been here. Curse him! we'll have him hung. To be sure—a bullet gone right through here—no; regularly plowed his flesh. Thank Heaven! not a dangerous wound. I can bandage it. But too much for a bridegroom. Poor lad! poor lad!"

He tore up his own handkerchief and made a pad of his sister's, but these were not enough. Look here, Rebecca," he said; "you'd better go and leave us."

"Nonsense!" said the lady sternly. "Go on with your work, and then a doctor must be fetched."

"Very well, then, if you will stay. There, don't try to revive him yet. Let's finish. Guest, my lad, take that knife and slit one of the sheets in the next room; then tear off a bandage four inches wide and as long as you can. Let's stop the bleeding, and he won't hurt."

All was done as he ordered, and the bandage roughly fixed, Stratton perfectly insensible the while.

"Becca, my dear—Guest, my lad," said the admiral huskily. "Never felt so sorry in my life." Then, taking Stratton's hand between both his own, he said, in a low voice, "I beg your pardon, my lad, humbly."

"I don't like this long insensibility, Mark," said Miss Jerrold.

"No; it's too long. Has he any rum or brandy in the place?"

"Yes," said Guest eagerly, and he hurried to the door of the bath closet, and turned the handle, but it was locked. "How tiresome!" he muttered. "Here, I know."



He dropped quickly on one knee by his friend, and thrust a hand into his coat pocket for his bunch of keys; when his hand came in contact with something, which he drew out with an ejaculation, and looked up at Sir Mark.

"A pistol!" said the latter, and they stared in each other's eyes, just as Stratton began to show signs of recovery.

"Why has he a pistol?" whispered Miss Jerrold; and her brother's whole manner changed.

"I was thinking that you ought to have fetched the police at once, my lad," he said; "but it's as well you did not. There are things men like hushed up."

"I—I—don't know what you mean," faltered Miss Jerrold, while Guest slowly laid the weapon on the table, looking ghastly pale, and feeling a sensation of heart-sickness and despair.

"Plain enough," said the admiral coldly. "There is something more, though, behind. Do you know what?" he cried sternly, as he fixed Guest with his eyes.

"On my honor, no, Sir Mark."

"It does not matter to us."

"But it does, Mark," cried Miss Jerrold piteously; "and I am confused. What does it all mean?"

"Heaven and the man himself alone know."

"But, Mark, dear; I cannot understand."

"Not with this before you plainly stamped," said the admiral bitterly. "Some old trouble—a lady, I suppose—men are all alike—there was an *exposé* imminent, I expect, and he sought a way out of it—the coward's way, and was too great a cur to take aim straight."

They all looked down in horror at Stratton, where he lay, to see that he was now sensible to their words, and glaring wildly from face to face.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE MAN IS MAD.

**S**TRATTON rose slowly, and he was evidently confused and not quite able to grasp all that had been going on, till a pang from his injured shoulder spurred his brain. His right hand went up to the bandage, and he began hastily to arrange his dress.

He was evidently sick and faint, but to restore his garments was for the moment the dominant idea.

Then another thought came, and he looked wildly round, hardly appearing to grasp the fact that friend and visitors had drawn back from him, while the former slowly uncocked the revolver and carefully extracted the cartridges, noting that four were filled, and two empty.

Guest knew the billet of one of the bullets, and he involuntarily looked round for the other.

He had not far to seek. The shade covering the wired and mounted bones of an ancient extinct bird standing on a cabinet was shattered, and the bullet had cut through the neck vertebræ, and then buried itself in the oaken paneling.

Guest lowered his eyes to his task again, and slowly placed the cartridges in one pocket, the pistol in the other, when, raising his eyes, he met the admiral's shadowed by the heavy brows ; and the old officer gave him a nod of approval.

"Well, Rebecca," he said, in a deep voice which seemed to hold the dying mutterings of the storm which had raged in his breast but a short time before ; "we may go. I can't jump on a fallen man."

"Yes," said Miss Jerrold, with a look of sadness and



sympathy at Stratton, who stood supporting himself against the table ; " we had better go. O Malcolm Stratton," she cried passionately, " and I did so believe in you."

He raised his face, with a momentary flush of pleasure bringing back something of its former aspect. But the gloom of despair came down like a cloud over a gleam of sunshine, and his chin fell upon his chest, though a movement now and then told that he was listening bitterly to every word.

" Yes," said Sir Mark ; " it's as well you did not get in the police. Keep it all quiet for everyone's sake. The doctor must know, though."

Stratton's face was a little raised at this, and he turned slightly as Guest said :

" Of course. It is not a dangerous wound, but look at him."

Stratton's chin fell again upon his breast.

" In a few hours," continued the admiral, " fever will probably set in."

A low, catching breath shook Stratton, and one hand grasped the table edge violently.

" And he will be delirious."

Stratton strove hard to contain himself, but he started violently, and raising his face he passed his right hand across his dripping brow.

" I cannot stop here, Guest," said Sir Mark. " Come, Rebecca, my dear. You must not leave him alone. Shall I send in a medical man ?"

" No !" cried Stratton hoarsely, in so fierce a voice that all started, and the admiral shrugged his shoulders, and drawing himself up crossed to the door, his sister following him with her face full of perplexity and commiseration.

But she turned as she reached the door, hesitated for a moment, and the rigid hardness in her face, with its anger



against the man who had done her niece so cruel a wrong, died away to give place to a gentle, womanly look of sorrow and reproach as she hurried back to where Stratton stood with his back to the table, grasping its edge, while the objects thereon trembled and tottered from the motion communicated by the man's quivering muscles.

"Heaven forgive you, Malcolm Stratton!" she said slowly. "I cannot now. I am going back to her. Man, you have broken the heart of as true and sweet a woman as ever lived."

Stratton did not stir, but stood there bent, and as if crushed, listening to the rustle of his visitor's rich silk, as she hurried back to her brother; then the door was opened, closed upon them, and a dead silence reigned in Stratton's study, as he and Guest stood listening to the faint sound of the descending steps till they had completely died away.

Then Guest turned to his friend:

"Now," he said coldly, "give me your arm. No; stop. Where are your keys?"

Stratton raised his head sharply.

"Where are your keys?"

"What for?"

"I want to get the spirits to give you a dram."

"No, no," said Stratton firmly. "Now go!"

"Of course," said Guest bitterly. "That's my way when you're in trouble. You miserable fool! You madman!" he roared, flashing out suddenly with passion. "What is it? Two years ago, when I came here and found you with that cyanide bottle on the table, and the glass ready with its draught, I stopped you then, you coward. This time you were alone to attempt your wretched work."

Stratton glared at him wildly.

"And here have we all been scared to death, fearing that you had been attacked. The admiral said you were a miserable coward, and you are. Where is your manhood?"



Where is your honor, to carry on like this with poor Myra till the last moment, and then do this? Hang it, man, why didn't you aim straight and end it, instead of bringing us to such a pitiful scene as this?"

Stratton drew his breath hard.

"There, I've done. It's jumping, as he said, on a fallen man. But I was obliged to speak. Now, then, those keys."

"Go!" cried Stratton sternly. "Go. Leave me!"

"To play some other mad prank? Not I. I want those keys to get out the brandy."

"I tell you no—no."

"Very well. It was to save you from fainting. Faint then, and be hanged. Give me your arm."

"Will you go?" cried Stratton fiercely.

"Yes, when you are on your bed, and then only to the door to call someone——"

"What?"

"To fetch the nearest doctor. Come along."

"Percy Guest——" began Stratton fiercely.

"It's of no use," said Guest. "Only waste of words. Come along."

Stratton made a quick movement to avoid him, and staggered into a chair; when his eyes closed, and he lay back fainting.

"Poor wretch!" muttered Guest, snatching the basin and sponge to begin bathing the already damp face. "I oughtn't to have bullied him."

In a few moments Stratton opened his eyes again, and his first look was directed round the room.

"It's all right, old chap," said Guest. "Temper's gone. Come, be sensible. I won't say disagreeable things to you. Give up the keys. You'd be better for a drop of brandy."

"No," said Stratton hastily. "Go and leave me now."

"Impossible. You must have the doctor."



"I cannot ; I will not."

"But you must."

"Do you hear what I say ?" cried Stratton fiercely.

"Yes. There is no occasion to fly out at me for wanting to be of service."

"I want no help. I must be alone."

"To go wandering off into a fit of delirium. There, I'll call old mother Brade to fetch a surgeon."

"You will not do so. I forbid it."

"Exactly, but you are a patient now. There, don't be idiotic. I can read you like a book."

Stratton looked up at him sharply.

"You don't want the doctor to see your wound and know how it came—there, don't stare in that wild way—leave it to me. It was an accident. You were fooling about with a revolver. Cleaning it, say ; and it went off. That's all the doctor need know."

"No one must know even that."

"But your wound must be properly dressed."

"I will not have it touched," cried Stratton decisively.

"Now, once more. I am not much hurt. Go."

Guest laughed bitterly.

"No, my boy, you don't get rid of me. I'll stick to you like your conscience."

Stratton's eyes dilated.

"And I'm going to be master here till you are well bodily and mentally."

"I tell you I am not much hurt. Mentally ! Pooh, I'm as well as you are."

"Better, of course. Why, what nonsense you are talking !" cried Guest, pointing to the other's wounded shoulder. "Come, don't let us argue more. Give in sensibly, there's a good fellow, and let me do my best for you. I know you see things in a wrong light now, but you'll thank me some day."



They watched each other furtively, and Guest could see how hard his friend was evidently planning to get rid of him, while, on his own part, he was calculating his chances. He knew that mad people were superhumanly strong, but then in spite of his conduct he could not in his own mind grant that Stratton was mad. It was a case of what coroners call "temporary insanity," due to some trouble which had been kept hidden ; and if there should be a struggle, Guest felt that he would be more than a match for his friend, injured as he was.

Stratton was the first to speak, in a low voice, which suggested his being faint and in great pain.

"Now I'm better. Will you go and leave me?"

Guest took a chair, and placing its back opposite to his friend, strode across it, and rested his arms on the rail.

"Look here, Stratton, old fellow ; I've always trusted you, and you've always trusted me."

"Yes, of course," said Stratton hurriedly.

"Well, then, as your old chum—the man who has stuck to you and is going to stick to you all through this hobble into which you have got yourself—don't you think it would be as well to make a clean breast of it—to me?"

Stratton's eyes dilated as he spoke, and his look was so strange that Guest involuntarily prepared himself for some outbreak.

"You can trust me," continued Guest, and he saw a look of despair come into his friend's countenance. "Come, old chap, what's the use of a friend if he is not to help you? You know I want to."

Stratton's lips parted in an almost inaudible, "Yes."

"Well, then, for poor Myra's sake."

Stratton started as if he had been stung.

"I can't help hurting you, and I repeat—for her sake. She is a woman. She loves you."



"For pity's sake, don't, don't," groaned Stratton in a voice full of unutterable anguish.

"She loves you, I say," continued Guest firmly; "and, whatever has been the cause of this madness, she will forgive you."

Stratton shook his head slowly.

"But I say she will. Come, we are none of us perfect. I tell you I am fighting for you now as well as myself. Your act this morning injures Edie and me too. So take it like this, old fellow. You have done wrong in some way; is not an attempt to make amends the first step toward showing repentance?"

"You don't know—you don't know," groaned the wretched man.

"Not yet; you will not be open. Come now, be frank with me. In your utter despair, consequent upon your nerves being weak with mental worry, you used that pistol."

Stratton buried his face in his hands.

"The old man was right," continued Guest; "it was a cowardly way to get out of the difficulty. Let me help you. Come, once more, make a clean breast of it."

Stratton's hands fell again, and there was an eager look in his face; his lips parted and he was about to speak, but the look faded away and in a despondent, weary way he sank back once more.

"Very well. I will not press you now," said Guest. "You'll think better of it, old fellow. I'll wait. Now, then, let me help you into your room."

"What for?" cried Stratton suspiciously.

"Because a wounded man must be better lying down."

"So that you can lock me in and go for people—for doctors?"

"He is queer," thought Guest. "The cunning of a man off his head."

As he thought this he rose, walked to the bedroom



door, opened it, and took the key out to hand to his friend.

"There, are you satisfied? Look here, Mal, even to better you I will not play any treacherous trick like that?"

"I believe you," said Stratton quietly; and he waved away the hand holding the key.

"So far, so good, then. Will you come and lie down while I fetch a doctor?"

"No. I will not have a doctor. It is a mere scratch."

"Very well. Come and sit down, then."

Stratton shook his head.

"Invalids must be humored, I suppose. Sit where you are then, and try and have a nap. You'll be calmer afterward—I hope," he added to himself.

Guest changed the position of his chair, took up a book, and crossed to a lounge, but as he was in the act of turning it he saw that Stratton was watching him keenly.

"Don't do that. I want you to leave me now."

"I know you do," said Guest quietly; "but I am not going."

Stratton drew a heavy, catching breath, and lay back in his chair, while Guest opened the book he had taken at random, and read from it half a dozen romances which he made up as he went on. For he could not see a word of the printed matter, and in each of these romances his friend was the hero, who was being hunted to desperation by some woman with whom he had become entangled.

From time to time he glanced across at his friend as the hours glided by, hoping to see that he slept; but he always caught a glimpse of a pair of eager eyes watching him.

At last, about six o'clock, faint, weary, and oppressed by the terrible silence in the room, Guest laid down the book.

"Going?" said Stratton eagerly.

"No. Only to send for Mrs. Brade."

"What for?"



"To get her to run to the Peacock, and tell them to bring some dinner and a bottle of Bass. You can eat something?"

"Bring dinner—here?" gasped Stratton.

"Yes. I have had nothing since early breakfast."

"You cannot have it here," said Stratton, making an effort, and speaking firmly. "I am better and calmer now. After a night's rest I shall be myself again."

"I hope so," said Guest quietly.

"So go now, there's a good fellow. I'll explain everything to you some day, and I shall be far better alone."

"Yes; you are fit to trust!"

"You need not sneer. You think I shall make some insane attempt upon my life."

Guest looked at him fixedly.

"Yes; you have good reason for doubting me, but I swear to you that you may trust me."

At that moment steps were heard upon the stairs, almost inaudible; but whoever it was whistled some melody, and before Stratton could stay him, Guest threw open the door, and called to the whistler to come back.

"Want me, sir?" said a telegraph boy, appearing in the opening.

"Yes," said Guest, giving the boy sixpence; "ask the woman at the lodge to come up here directly."

"All right, sir."

Guest returned to his seat, and saw that Stratton's face was averted and his eyes closed.

"Finds he must give way," said the young barrister to himself; and once more there was silence, till Mrs. Brade's knock was heard.

Guest admitted her, and cut short a string of wondering exclamations by giving her his orders.

"Oh, certainly, sir," she cried; "but I thought——"

"Yes, of course you did, my dear madam, but unfortunately Mr. Stratton was suddenly taken ill."



“Oh, poor dear!” cried Mrs. Brade, in deep concern.  
“Let me go and ask my doctor to——”

“No,” cried Stratton so fiercely that the woman started and turned pale.

“Go and do as I said,” whispered Guest; and after a while the refreshments were brought, partaken of, and, in spite of his friend’s protests, Guest insisted upon passing the night in an easy-chair, dropping off to sleep occasionally, to dream that Stratton was threatening to destroy his life, and waking to find him in his easy-chair thrust back to the side of the fireplace between him and the paneled door.



## CHAPTER XXIV.

### TWO NIGHTS OF WATCHING.

**T**HANK goodness ! " said Guest to himself, as he moved slightly and saw that his companion appeared to be sleeping heavily ; but as he rose Stratton followed his example, looking very pale, but more like himself.

" Morning ; how are you ? " said Guest.

" Better—much better."

" You should have undressed and gone to bed, and you'd have been better still. How's the shoulder ? "

" Gave me a good deal of pain several times in the night, but it is easier now."

" Glad of it, but take my advice ; let's have in a doctor, and let him dress it properly."

" There's no need," said Stratton quietly. " A wound only needs to be kept from exposure to the air to heal itself."

" Well, of all the obstinate fellows ! "

" Oh, no," said Stratton, with a wan smile. " You see I have been very obedient. If the wound is disposed to turn bad, as I shall soon know, I will have medical advice. If there is no need, surely you can spare me the annoyance of answering a surgeon all kinds of questions, and being tied down to his routine."

" Well, I will not worry you, old fellow, for you do seem to be better."

" Much," said Stratton quietly. " I only want to be at peace for a time. I think I shall go into the country."

" Will you ? "

" Y-e-s, I think I will."

" With me. Then we'll go as soon as you can start."



"No, no," cried Stratton excitedly. "I should be poor company, and would rather go alone."

"Not fit. Look here. Happy thought. I'll ask Brettison in."

"No, no!" cried Stratton excitedly.

"But he's the very man. Quiet, calm, and don't talk. Go and pick buttercups and daisies along with him for a few days, and then come back to me quite *compos mentis*, and we'll see what can be done."

Guest made toward the door, but Stratton intercepted him.

"I tell you no," he said firmly, "and—and—Brettison is out."

"Out?"

"Gone into the country."

"Humph!" ejaculated Guest, looking at his friend curiously, for there was something in his manner which puzzled him. But Stratton said cheerfully:

"Nearly nine. Will you order some breakfast from the tavern?"

"Eh, to be sure. Let's go. No; afraid you are not well enough. I'll send Mrs. Brade. But no nonsense," said Guest.

"I give you my word," said Stratton quietly.

"I take it;" and after a visit to the bedroom Guest came back, looking refreshed and ready to go out and order the meal to be brought.

In due time this was at the door, and, to the young barrister's great satisfaction his friend drank a cup of coffee, and ate sparingly of some dry toast, looking every minute more and more himself.

There were moments when his face twitched and his eyes looked strange; but that Guest set down to the pain of his wound; and in the course of the morning, feeling more and more relieved, he said:

"Look here, old fellow, I think if you'll give me your



word of honor there shall be no nonsense, I'll go back to my place and change"—he glanced at his wedding garments as he spoke.

"Yes, I would," said Stratton quietly.

"You are not going to be ill?"

"Certainly not."

"And I can trust you?"

"Of course."

"Then I will go."

"Oh, yes; I shall be all right now, and I may write to you from the country and ask you to join me."

"Thanks," said Guest dryly; "but you are not going yet. We'll talk about that when I come back."

"Come back?" said Stratton wildly.

"Oh, yes; I shan't be above an hour."

"But, really, my dear Percy——"

"I will not hear a word now. There, let some fresh air into the room; the place smells stuffy; my fault, I suppose. It's as if the ghosts of all the cigars I have smoked here were rising up in evidence against me. Ta ta! I shall not be long."

Stratton made no reply, but smiled at him faintly as he passed out and closed the door after him. But the moment Stratton was alone there was a sudden change. He clasped his hands to his head, and began to pace the room with rapid strides, but dropped one arm directly as he turned pallid with pain.

"What to do?" he muttered—"what to do? Mad? Enough to make me. Well, let them think what they please. It makes no difference now."

He thrust his hand into his pocket and took out a key, and then shuddered; but drawing himself up, he set his teeth hard and crossed to where the easy-chair stood in which he had passed the night, wheeled it from the door, and went to the window after slipping the bolt.



His hand was on the blind, and he was in the act of drawing it down when there was a knock, and he stood as if paralyzed.

"Back so soon!" he thought, and, as if recalling the scene of the previous day, when Guest insisted upon admission, he gave a sharp glance round the room, smoothed his hair, and went and opened the door.

"Thank you, sir," said Mrs. Brade, stepping in; and he involuntarily gave way. "Mr. Guest asked me to come in and tidy you."

"No, no, not to-day. I——"

"But Mr. Guest said I was to, sir, and if you objected I was to tell you to be calm. It's very glad I am to see you much better," said the woman, going to the bedroom. "Why, you haven't been to bed all night, sir. I don't wonder you look pale," she continued, re-entering and crossing the room. "Did you use your bath?"

She uttered a wild cry as Stratton rushed at her, caught her by the shoulder with a fierce grip, and swung her away.

"I tell you," he cried, with a fierce growl, "I will not have the place touched. Go! At once!"

The woman was too much alarmed to speak, and, making for the door, hurried out, and made for the porter's lodge, "that agitated," as she said to herself afterward, "that she felt as if she could never go there again."

Stratton wiped the cold sweat from his brow as soon as he was alone, and once more began to pace the room, with the key in his hand. But he did not use it. Thrusting it back in his pocket, he sat down and hurriedly wrote a letter, in which he inclosed a check; then looking out an address from a directory, he fastened down the envelope, and opened the window, at which he waited till he saw a familiar face, and asked its owner to slip the letter in the first pillar box.



This act seemed to revive him, and he grew a little calmer. He turned to a cabinet containing natural history specimens preserved in spirits, and taking out first one and then another, he carefully examined them, removing the tied-down stoppers of several of the large-mouthed vessels ; and he was still examining one of these, with the spirit therein looking limpid still, when there was a double knock.

His first idea, as he started up, was to hurriedly replace the glass vessel, but a moment's thought decided him upon leaving it on the table and opening the door.

"Back again, you see," said Guest, looking at him inquiringly. "Ah, busy with your specimens. That's right. Nothing like keeping the mind busy ; but clear away ; the fellow will be here soon with the dinner, and I've brought some cigars. Mrs. Brade been ?"

"Yes ; but you are not going to stay here this evening ?"

"Indeed, but I am."

Stratton frowned, but said nothing, and in due time the dinner came, was eaten, and the evening became a repetition of the last, but with the difference that Stratton seemed far more calm and able to keep himself under control.

But as the night wore on he stubbornly refused to go to bed. If his friend intended to stay there in a chair, he would do the same.

"Compulsion will only make him wild and irritate his wound," thought Guest, and twelve o'clock struck as they settled themselves in their chairs as before.

"Better humor him," said Guest to himself, as he felt more content with the change growing in his friend ; "he'll be better to-morrow, and then, perhaps, tell me all about his trouble."

The lamp had been turned down, so that the room was



very gloomy, but there was light enough for Guest to make out the weird aspect of the busts and various natural history specimens about, one great eagle owl over the door catching a gleam of the lamp, and looking, with its fixed glass eyes, fully aware of the mystery overhanging the place. The various articles of furniture, too, assumed a strange guise, and cast shadows of a startling nature ; but, after a few minutes, Guest settled down to the contemplation of his friend, whose eyes seemed to be closed, though a few minutes later a faint scintillation showed that he was still awake and watchful.

But Guest was too weary now to feel any dread. Stratton was evidently sorry for his mad attempt, and perfectly sane, so, after a few brave efforts to keep awake, the young barrister calmly dropped off into a deep sleep, and the busy working of a dream, in which Edie was scornfully telling him that she had discovered all about his escapade with a dark woman resembling the queen of spades, and when he tried to catch her in his arms and convince her that he was a perfectly innocent man, she sprang from her seat, uttering a piercing cry.

Trembling and startled, Guest leaped up, to find the lamp turned to its full height, and, with the strange hoarse cry still ringing in his ears, he saw Stratton standing back against the cabinet farthest from the fireplace, glaring wildly, while from out of the closet, apparently, a curious rustling noise, followed by a dull blow upon something hollow, fell upon his ear.



## CHAPTER XXV.

### MRS. BRADE HAS IDEAS.

**T**HINKING over the events of the past nights, and the overwrought state of his friend's nerves, which had made him start in horror from his sleep at the noise made by the rats which infested the old house, Guest went on to muse over his position, and the prospects of the admiral accepting him as a husband for his niece, while Myra's engagement stood as it did.

"Time cures all things," he muttered. "Wonder how the poor boy feels now. By George, he startled me and spoiled my night."

He had been having an early walk, Stratton seeming calm enough that morning, and he was now returning through the archway when there was a low cough, and he heard his name uttered.

Turning sharply, it was to see Mrs. Brade at her doorway, beckoning to him.

"Good-morning. You wish to speak to me?"

"Yes, sir, if you would not mind stepping inside, sir. I'm all alone, except my husband, sir."

Guest stepped into the little room, half parlor, half kitchen, of the porter's lodge, and Mrs. Brade carefully wiped a highly polished, well beeswaxed chair with her apron and set it by the fire.

"No, no, not there," said Guest hastily. "I'm hot enough already."

"Of course, sir," said the woman, changing the position; "and you've been walking, sir. One oughtn't to have a fire a



day like this ; only you see, sir, one must cook and do everything here when one only has one room."

"Of course, Mrs. Brade ; but it is quite a little palace of cleanliness."

"Which it's very good of you to say so, sir," said Mrs. Brade, with an ill-used air, "and it would be if it wasn't for my husband. He's one of the best of men, sir, but that untidy in his habits. What with one boot here, and another boot there, and tobacco ashes all over the place, he nearly worries my life out."

A low, peculiar sound came from an ajar door, sounding like a remonstrant growl from the gentleman in question, whereupon Mrs. Brade went and shut the door, and drew an old moreen curtain across the opening.

"He do breathe a little hard in his sleep, sir," she said apologetically.

"And likes plenty of it, eh ?"

"Oh, dear no, sir. It's only eleven yet," replied Mrs. Brade, glancing at a sallow-faced Dutch clock on the wall. "He isn't doo till twelve. You forget, sir, as he's up pretty well all night to let in gents at all hours."

"Loose fish ?"

"Some of 'em, sir—if you means gents as don't behave themselves and comes home smelling of spirits horrid. But most of 'em's from Fleet Street, sir, from the noose-papers, as keeps 'em till two and three and four o'clock, and sometimes later."

"Of course, of course, Mrs. Brade," said Guest, rising. "We must have our morning papers."

"Yes, sir, *and* our bread and rolls ; not that I wish you to think we've anyone in the inn as is a baker."

"I did not think so, Mrs. Brade ; but I'm in a hurry."

"And I won't detain you, sir. But, of course, you were going in to see poor Mr. Stratton, sir."

"Yes ; what of that," said Guest sharply.



"I wanted to speak to you, sir, about him very serious, sir. Only yesterday, sir——"

"Yes; go on, my good woman, go on. Is there anything fresh?"

"Oh, yes, sir," said the woman, putting her apron to her eyes. "I know all about his love troubles from the first."

"Yes, yes."

"And how he was disappointed about having Miss Jerrold."

"Well?"

"And then, sir, when at last it was to come off, you see it was too much for him."

"And he has turned a little ill. There, he will soon be better."

"I hope so, sir," said Mrs. Brade, shaking her head, "but I'm afraid."

"Look here, you have seen or heard something to account, perhaps, for his sudden illness."

"Don't call it illness, sir; the poor dear gentleman is mad."

"Mrs. Brade!"

"It's a fact, sir, I assure you, and we may as well out with the truth."

"Look here," said Guest, speaking hoarsely, for he felt startled at the woman's words, coinciding so exactly with horrible thoughts hidden in his own breast. "This is a very serious thing to say. What grounds have you for such an assertion?"

"Well, sir, if you'll sit down I'll tell you."

Guest reseated himself, feeling that if he wished to hear, he must let the woman go on in her own way.

"I've always liked Mr. Stratton, sir, since he's been here, and his name always putting me in mind of Lady Burdett Coutts' house at the corner of Strutton Street, where I have visited one of the servants."



Guest made an impatient gesture.

"Yes, sir, I am coming to it as fast as I can. You see doing for him so long and looking upon him like a son, and doing for Mr. Brettison, too, as is always most aggravating about his dusting, and his room's a disgrace, but I never thought of Mr. Stratton turning like that."

"Like what?"

"I'm telling you, sir. Getting so that it's a favor to be allowed to go into his room to tidy up, and him watching you and following you about with his eyes, and glaring at you all the time."

"Of course, he does not like his specimens touched."

"All which I know, sir, and I've studied him; but he never went on as he does now."

"Oh, nonsense! he's ill and doesn't want to be worried."

"He's mad, sir, as Bedlam."

"Mrs. Brade!"

"He is, sir, and last night he tried to strangle me."

"What?"

"He did, sir, as I'm a sinful soul, and when I got away from him down the stairs and back here into my room, it's a mercy as I didn't faint away."

"He touched you?"

"Touched me, sir? He seized me. Oh, poor, dear gentleman, he's gone."

"Look here," said Guest sharply, "have you told anybody about it?"

"No, sir; not yet."

"Then for Heaven's sake don't, Mrs. Brade," said Guest, in a low, hurried tone. "It was, perhaps, only a sudden paroxysm. You say you like him."

"Which indeed I do, sir."

"Then pray be silent. If such a report were spread it would be his ruin."

"Yes, sir, I thought of all that, and doctors signing



things, and keepers coming to take him to shut him up in cells, with chains, and darkness, and howlings, and gnashing his teeth. Oh, my poor dear! my poor dear! Such a bonnie, good, lovable gentleman as you were!"

Mrs. Brade threw up her apron to her face and burst out into such a genuine passion of sobs and tears that Guest was touched, and he rose and placed his hand upon her arm.

"Hush, hush!" he whispered; "don't take on like that. Perhaps it is only due to excitement, and he'll soon come round."

"Do you think so, sir?" cried the woman, dropping her apron.

"I do, indeed, if he is kept quiet. Why, if it was known——"

"And the keepers came, sir?"

"Come, come, it's not so bad as that. You have curious ideas about the treatment of the insane."

"Oh, no, sir; I've heard so much, sir."

"Never mind: we will not argue that. One thing is certain—any worry or excitement would be sure to make him worse."

"Of course, sir."

At that moment Mr. Brade's hard breathing was audible through the door and curtain, and Guest looked at it uneasily.

"Then you have not told your husband?"

"Indeed, no, sir."

"Then do not. Nor anyone else. We must keep this as our secret, Mrs. Brade. My poor friend will come right, I hope and feel, in time; so help me to guard him from all worry."

"Indeed I will, sir."

"No one must know. It would be bad for him at the institution."

"Yes, sir, and he'd have to give up his chambers, of



course, if any of the neighbors—I mean gentlemen in the other rooms—made complaints.”

“All of which we can avoid. It only wants time. There, I’ll go up and see him now, and Mr. Brettison, too. Mind, I rely upon your being discreet.”

“Of course, sir, and thank you for coming in. You don’t know how much good you’ve done me, sir.”

“I’m glad you spoke to me,” said Guest ; and he went across the inn to Stratton’s chambers.



## CHAPTER XXVI.

### IN GROSS DARKNESS.

THE staircase was very gloomy and quiet as Guest ascended, and he paused on the landing on finding Stratton's outer door shut, and after a few moments' hesitation, turned off to the left, meaning to have a few words with Brettison about their friend's state.

This door was also shut and he turned back, but feeling that, perhaps, after all, Brettison might be in, he knocked ; waited ; knocked again, and stood listening.

"Off somewhere again picking flowers," muttered Guest. "Men begin by picking them as children, and some end their lives gathering the sweet, innocent looking things."

He, however, gave one more double knock before turning away and going back to Stratton's door.

Here he knocked gently, but there was no reply. He knocked again, feeling a sensation of nervousness come over him as he thought of the words of the porter's wife ; and, as there was no reply, he could not help a little self-congratulation at there being no admission.

But he frowned at his weakness directly

"Absurd ! Cowardice !" he muttered. "This is nothing like acting the friend."

He knocked again, and, as there was still silence, he lifted the cover of the letter slit and placed his lips to the place.

"Here, Malcolm, old fellow, open this door," he cried. "I'm sure you are there."

A faint rustling sound within told him he was right, and directly after the door was opened.

"You, Percy !" said the hollow faced, haggard man,



staring at him, and giving way unwillingly as, forcing himself to act, Guest stepped forward and entered the room.

He repented the moment he was inside, for the room looked strange and gloomy through the window blind being drawn down, and there was a singularly wild, strained look in Stratton's eyes, which never left him for a moment, suggestive of the truth of Mrs. Brade's words.

Stratton had hurriedly closed the outer door upon his friend's entrance, but he had left the inner undone; and now stood holding it open as if for his visitor to go.

Guest felt ready to obey, but he again mastered his weakness and took a chair, knowing that if he was to perform a manly act and save his friend, he must be calm and firm. But in spite of himself, as he took his seat he gave a hasty glance round the room, thinking of its loneliness, and the extreme improbability of anyone hearing a cry for help.

"Why have you come back so soon?" said Stratton at last.

"The old reason. Sort of stupid, spaniel-like feeling for the man who kicks me."

Stratton made a hasty gesture.

"Didn't like to stop away long after your being so upset last night."

Stratton shuddered, and his friend watched him curiously again.

"I'm much better now."

"Glad of it, but your nerves are terribly unstrung; or you wouldn't be ready to jump out of your skin at the sound of a rat."

Stratton shuddered.

"I know you couldn't help it."

"No, but it's going off now fast, and if I could be alone I should soon be right."

"Doubt it. No good; you must put up with me for a bit."



He tried to look laughingly in his companion's eyes, but there was a strong feeling of dread at his heart as he felt that wild thoughts evidently existed in his friend's brain, and that there was some terrible mischief hatching there.

"Look here, Mal," he said, mastering his own shrinking by remembrance of how the strong-witted man could often master the brain unhinged; "my impression is that you want change. Suppose you and I take a run. What do you say to Switzerland, and start to-day?"

Stratton shuddered, and a curious, sneering smile dawned on his face.

"Why don't you ask me to explain my conduct again?" he said fiercely.

"Because I have no right to. You are your own master, and are answerable to yourself."

"I'll tell you," continued Stratton, without heeding his visitor's words, "it is because you think I am mad."

"Do I? Absurd!"

"Yes. That is why you are here."

"I am not going to contradict you; but I will tell you why I am here. My old friend and companion suddenly turned queer, attacked with some illness, and I said to myself, 'If I were to be bad like that I hope poor old Mal would come to me as I'm going to him.'"

A hoarse sound, like a suppressed sob, escaped from Stratton's lips, and, by a rapid movement, he caught and wrung Guest's hand. But the wild look never left his eyes, and at the end of a few seconds he cast the hand away.

"Oh, it's true enough, old lad," said Guest, smiling. "You know it, too. I want to do it for everybody's sake."

Stratton made a peculiar movement in the air with his extended hands.

"Come, come, don't take it that way, old fellow," cried Guest. "Sit down."



Stratton hesitated, and seemed to be trying to resist, but his friend's calm firm way mastered him.

"That's better ; now, then, let's look matters plainly in the face, as doctor and patient if you like. You're off the line, Mal. There's no denying it. Overstrain. Well, it's bad. Painful for you and everybody."

A low moan escaped from Stratton.

"Bah ! don't groan over it, man. The human mind is a wonderful bit of machinery, and it gets out of order if you don't take care. You haven't taken enough care, and have broken down. Bad ; but we've got to mend you and make you stronger than ever."

Stratton shook his head, and his pallor was so ghastly, as he now sank back in his chair and closed his eyes, that Guest was startled, and sprang up and made for the closet where he knew from of old that the spirit stand was kept.

But at the first movement in that direction Stratton leaped to his feet and intercepted him.

"Stop !" he cried. "I am not ill. Let me be, Guest. You can do me no good."

"How do you know ? I say I can," cried the young man sharply, "and what's more, I will. Now, come, lad, be reasonable. You're out of gear, and you're going to submit to me."

"I am my own master, as you said, and I will not be spied over or interfered with."

"Spied over" sounded bad—not like the words of a sane man.

"Bah ! Who wants to spy over you ?"

"Interfered with, then. Now go and leave me to myself."

"I shall not," said Guest doggedly.

"You will, sir. These are my rooms ; your visit is ill-timed ; please to go, and wait till I ask you to visit me again."

"Hah, that settles it, if there were any doubt before.



That's not my old schoolfellow talking. You are ill—mentally ill, lad—so give in.”

“Leave my rooms, sir!”

“If I do, it will be to bring others back with me who will insist upon your yielding to proper treatment.”

“Hah, you confess then? You think me mad.”

“I did not say mad; I told you what I know now to be a fact. Will you give in and let me treat you on sound, common-sense principles, or drive me away to come back with others?”

“You would not dare,” said Stratton, in a low, fierce whisper.

“But I do dare anything for your sake—there, I'll speak out!—for Myra's.”

A spasm convulsed Stratton's face, and he ground his teeth as if in agony.

“I can't help it, lad; I'm being cruel to be kind. Now, then, do you persist in sending me away!”

Stratton looked round in a furtive, frightened way, shuddered, and was silent.

“Then I am to go and send others who will treat you. I must tell you the truth, lad; they may insist upon your leaving here and taking up your abode somewhere in the country.”

Stratton started.

“No, no; not at a madhouse. You are not mad. Only suffering from a nervous fit. It would be to stay for a time at some doctor's, and I think it would be the best thing. It would get you away from the dull, gloomy chambers, where you hardly ever see the sun. They are bad enough to upset anyone. Once more, which is it to be?”

Guest had been startled enough before by his friend's acts and ways; his conduct now indorsed all prior thoughts of his state. For, as he rose and moved toward the door as if to go, Stratton sprang to him and caught his arm.



"I give in," he said huskily. "You are right. A little out of order. Nerves, I suppose. But no doctor. There is no need. I'll—I'll do everything you wish."

"Then you'll come abroad with me?"

"No. No, I cannot. I will not."

"Very well, then, I'm not going to see you grow worse before my eyes. I shall do as I said."

"No, no, for Heaven's sake, don't be so mad as to do that. Look here, Guest. I am ill, and weak, and low. I confess it, but I shall be better here. It is as you say, overstrain. If you force me to go somewhere else, I shall be ten times worse. I'll do anything you advise, yield to you in every way, but I must stay here. The institution, you know."

"Leave of absence for a sick man."

"I could not ask for it. Besides, my work will do me good. I should mope and be miserable away."

"Not on the Swiss Alps."

"I tell you I will not go," said Stratton fiercely.

"Very well, I'll be satisfied with what you have promised. So just draw up that blind and open the window wide."

Stratton hesitated.

"At once, man. Your promise. The air of Benchers' Inn is not particularly good ; but it's better than this mephitic odor of stuffiness and gas. Why, Mal, old lad, I can smell the methylated spirits in which you preserve your specimens quite plainly."

A faint ring of white showed round Stratton's eyes ; but Guest did not notice it, for his back was turned as he made for the window and let in the light and air.

"That's better. Now go to your bedroom, and make yourself look more like the Malcolm Stratton I know. I'll be off now. I shall be back at a quarter to seven, and then we'll go out and have a bit of dinner together."

"No, no ; I could not go."



"What! I'm coming, I say, at a quarter to seven, and then we're going out to dine."

"Very well," said Stratton meekly, and his friend left the chambers.

"Only touched a little," said Guest, as he went across the inn, put his head in at the lodge, and nodded pleasantly to Mrs. Brade, for she was engaged with someone else.

"Better, Mrs. Brade—nothing to mind. He'll soon be all right," he continued to himself. "Poor old chap. Only wants a strong will over him. Wish mine were stronger, and I had a little more manly pluck; but he did not see how nervous I was; and, take it altogether, I did not do so badly."

What time Stratton was pacing his room and talking hurriedly to himself.

"It is horrible," he muttered; "too much for a man to bear. Do I look so wild?"

He stopped in front of an old Venetian mirror, and scanned his haggard countenance for a few moments before turning away with a shudder, to resume his walk up and down the room.

"They could do it," he said fiercely. "I could not help myself. My conduct would be sufficient plea. A visit from a couple of doctors, and no matter what I said, I might be taken away. Medical supervision," he said, with a bitter laugh; "imprisonment till such time as they chose to set me free. Well, it would be pleasant to be able to throw all responsibilities upon someone else if one could only cease to think. But that would be too terrible. I must give up everything and trust to Guest."

He looked sharply round the room again, and stood listening, for he fancied that he heard a sound, and, stepping softly to the panel door on the right of the fireplace, he placed his ear to the woodwork, and stood listening for some moments.



But he was evidently dissatisfied. He seemed to be trying to make out whether anyone was in Brettison's room ; but he was listening at the end of a passage turned into a closet like his own, and he knew that if the door at the other end were closed it was in vain.

He came away at last with a quick gesture indicating his discontent, and stood hesitating for a few minutes, when he again started and looked wildly toward the fireplace, for he was convinced that he heard sounds in the next chambers.

They ceased, though, directly, and might have come from above ; but he once more went back to the panel on the right, listened, and came away dissatisfied still.

"I must know," he said with a heavy sigh ; and, taking a bunch of keys from his pocket, he stood selecting one which looked black and rusty, a good-sized key, from among those which had been worn smooth and remained bright.

This done, he stood hesitating ; and, looking straight before him, he shrank slowly backward till checked by a book-case standing against the wall, when with an angry gesture that he should have been startled by the sight of his own ghastly face in the old mirror, he walked straight to the door on the left of the fireplace. Again he paused for a few moments, and then, with the sweat standing in great beads upon his brow, and the hair at his temples wet and clinging, he slowly, and without a sound, inserted the key, turned it in the well oiled lock, and drew open the door, which came toward him with a faint creak.

He stood there peering into the darkness of the narrow, passage-like place, listening, and then came away to the other side of the room, thrust off his boots, and went to the window, which he closed again, and drew down the blind before going back to the door—entering, and walking to the end, to stand listening at the panel in the darkness



for some minutes before he came out again, acting now with decision, as he went to the door of exit from the room, and slipped the bolt.

Drawing a deep breath, he now hurried across to a little cabinet, from which he drew a bright steel implement, and then, with his brow rugged and his face looking old and worn, he was hurrying across back to the door of the open closet, when he caught his unshod foot in a thick Eastern rug, stumbled forward, and only saved himself from a heavy fall by throwing himself into an easy-chair.

He rose, holding his left wrist as if it were sprained, and then stooped to pick up the steel implement he had dropped on the carpet.

The change which came over the man was terrible as he stopped there, fixed of eye, fascinated as it were, and unable to move, glaring at a place on the carpet laid bare by the rug being kicked over. And a minute must have elapsed before he could tear himself away and draw himself up to hold the back of his hand across his eyes, as if to shut out some horrible vision.

The sigh he heaved was hoarse and strange as he dropped his hand again, and hurriedly drew the rug back into its former position.

That done, his mental strength seemed to return, and seizing the steel tool, he listened for a moment, and then hurried into the dark, passage-like closet.

At that moment there was a sharp double knock at the outer door, and, active now as a cat, Stratton sprang into the room, listening to faintly heard, descending steps.

Then, opening the inner door, he saw that there was a letter in the box, and satisfied of the cause of the interruption, he closed and bolted the inner door again, and once more crossed to the closet and entered.

Then, from out of the darkness, came sound after sound as if someone was busy at work. Now it was the creaking



of a hinge ; then a faint rap, as of a lid escaping too soon from a person's hand, and after that, for quite an hour, the rasping and cracking of wood, till Stratton came out bathed with perspiration, and looking more ghastly than ever.

This time he stood wiping the great drops from his dripping brow before taking a flask from a shelf, unscrewing the top, and drinking deeply.

He listened again, and once more drawing a deep breath he hurried back into the darkness of the closet, where the creaking noise was repeated, and followed twice by a deep, booming sound, after which there was a long-continued muffled gurgling, as of water flowing, and a peculiar odor filled the room.

This was repeated ; and at last Stratton reeled out of the place panting, staggered to the window, which he opened a little way by passing his hands under the blind, and held his face there to breathe the fresh air before hurrying back to his writing table. Here he struck a match, lit a taper, and, taking it up, moved toward the closet door like one in a dream, but stopped short, blew out the light, and plunged into the darkness once again.



## CHAPTER XXVII.

### GUEST SPEAKS OUT.

“WHY not a run to St. Malo and a couple of months’ yachting?”

Sir Mark proposed as a cure foreign travel, but Myra refused to go. Edie tried vainly to inveigle her into some distraction, and Guest spent a little fortune in concert and opera tickets in trying to persuade her to accompany them, but they were generally wasted.

Miss Jerrold tried hard, too, and was more successful, coaxing her niece to come and stay at her house, or to spend quiet afternoons with her, no one else being admitted. And all the time it was understood that the unfortunate engagement was a subject tabooed; but one day, when Myra was with her alone, Guest having been there by accident when the cousins came—that is to say, by one of his accidents, and at a suggestion from Miss Jerrold that a walk would do Edie good, as her face looked “very pasty,” having taken Edie for the said walk—Miss Jerrold seeing the wistful eyes, sunken cheeks, and utter prostration of her niece’s face, bethought her of a plan to try and revive interest in things mundane, at a time when the girl seemed to be slowly dropping out of life.

“We’ve petted and cosseted her too much,” said Aunt Jerrold to herself. “I’ll try that.”

She tried *that*, and attacked her niece in a very blunt, rough way, keenly watching the effect of her words the while.

“I do wonder at a girl of your spirit wearing your heart out for the sake of a scoundrel. That’s done it!” she



added to herself, for a complete change came over Myra's aspect.

"Aunt!" she cried indignantly.

"I can't help it, my dear," said the old lady sharply. "I've kept it back too long, and it's only just that I should tell you how reprehensible your conduct is. Here is a wretched man who professes to love you——"

"Malcolm Stratton did love me, aunt," said Myra proudly, as stung beyond endurance she gave utterance to the thoughts she had kept hidden so long.

"Looks like it!" continued Aunt Jerrold. "Bah! the horsepond is too good for such as he!"

Myra turned upon her fiercely.

"Aunt," she cried, "it is not true!"

"But it is true, my dear, or the wretch would have said a few words in his defense."

"I cannot stay here and listen to you, aunt," cried Myra, rising with dignity. "It is cruel of you to speak of Mr. Stratton like this."

"Oh, of course. Silly girl! The worse a man is, the more weak, infatuated woman defends him."

"I defend him, aunt, because I am sure there must be some good reasons for Mr. Stratton's conduct. He was not the man who could have acted so. His whole career gives your charges the lie."

At that moment Edie and Guest returned, the former joyous and bright, but forcing a serious look as soon as she saw her cousin's agitated face.

"I am waiting for you, Edie," said Myra coldly; and, turning to her aunt, she bent her head slightly. "Good-afternoon, Mr. Guest," she said, and she left the drawing room.

"Aunt, dear, what is the matter?" whispered Edie.

"We've been quarreling, my dear; thank goodness!" said Miss Jerrold dryly. "There, good-by. Run after



her, little woman. Kiss me ; I haven't quarreled with you."

She embraced the girl affectionately ; and as Guest followed to the door, and held out his hand, Miss Jerrold whispered :

"Come up again when you've seen them to the carriage."

In five minutes Guest was back looking at his hostess wonderingly, for the old lady was standing in the middle of the room with her face full of wrinkles, and her arms folded across her chest. She did not seem to see him, and he made a slight movement to attract her attention, when she waved her hand toward a chair.

"Sit down, boy," she said, without looking in his direction ; "I'm thinking. I'll attend to you directly."

He obeyed, more puzzled than ever ; and at last she took a chair by the back, dragged it across the carpet in a masculine way, and thumped it down in front of him.

"It's not a pleasant subject for a lady—an unmarried lady—to talk about, Percy Guest," she said ; "but I'm getting such an old woman now that I think it's time I might speak plainly."

"What about ?" said Guest, wondering of what breach of good manners he had been guilty.

"What about, you silly boy ? Here's poor Myra eating her heart out, Edie miserable, my brother a perfect bear, I'm worried to death, and you say, what about ! Malcolm Stratton, to be sure."

"Oh !" cried Guest, very much relieved.

"Well, I do not see anything to look pleased about, sir."

"No, of course not ; only I thought I had been doing something."

"You have been doing nothing, it seems to me," said Miss Jerrold sharply.

"Really, I have done my best."

"But I thought barristers were such clever people !"



"Oh, dear no," said Guest seriously. "Very stupid folk as a rule. Sort of gun a barrister is. The solicitor is the clever man, and he has to load the barrister before he goes off."

"Then for goodness' sake get some solicitor to load you, and then go off and shoot something."

"I wish you would load me, Miss Jerrold."

"Well, look here, my dear boy. We seem to have settled down to a belief that Malcolm Stratton has been a great scamp, and that he drew back on his wedding morning in consequence of the interference of some lady who had a hold upon him."

"Yes, that is what we thought," said Guest sadly.

"And then tried to commit suicide out of misery and shame?"

"Yes, I have been able to get no further, poor fellow. He is utterly dumb, as soon as I try to get anything from him."

"What does that friend of his—that Mr. Brettison say?"

"Mr. Brettison? I have not seen him."

"Why not? He has known Mr. Stratton many years. You should have consulted him, and tried to find out from him what might have happened in days gone by."

"I did think of that."

"And did not act?"

"I have had no chance. Mr. Brettison is out of town. I have not seen him since the wed——"

"Ah!" cried Miss Jerrold warningly.

"Since that unhappy day."

"On that day?"

"No. It was a day or two before, but I think I heard Stratton say Mr. Brettison came to see him that day, and that he was going out of town."

"Humph! That's strange!"



"Why?" said Guest.

"He was very fond of Malcolm Stratton, wasn't he—I mean, isn't he?"

"Yes, of course."

"Why should he go out, on Stratton's wedding day, instead of stopping to congratulate him?"

"I don't know. It was odd, but Mr. Brettison is eccentric."

"It's more than odd, Percy Guest," said Miss Jerrold, looking very keen and intent; "the clew lies that way. Mr. Brettison must have known something and quarreled with Malcolm Stratton, it seems to me."

"You think so?"

"Yes; his conduct suggests it. Out of town? Hasn't he been to his chambers since?"

"I think not."

"There's your clew then. I've loaded you. Go off."

"And find Mr. Brettison?"

"Of course. Then try and get from him the information we want."

"Do we want that information, Miss Jerrold?"

"Of course we do, sir. Malcolm Stratton's actions may be purged from their grossness, and happiness come after all."

"Heaven grant it may!" cried Guest.

"There, then, you have something sensible to do; better than always calling here in your speculative way. Go to work at once, and come and communicate with me."

Guest went off at once, and had himself driven to Benchers' Inn, where he ascended to Stratton's door; but turned off to Brettison's, where all was dark and silent.

He knocked, but there was no answer; and, after repeating the knock several times, he went to Stratton's door, where he had no better success. Going down, he crossed to the tunnel-like archway, where he found Mrs.



Brade, and learned that Mr. Brettison had not yet returned from the country.

"Mr. Stratton does not seem to be at home either."

"No, sir. He goes out a deal now, and is very seldom at home. Many people come to ask for him, and I give them his message—that they are to write."

"Well, that's reasonable enough if they have not made appointments, Mrs. Brade, so pray don't shake your head like that."

"Certainly not, sir, if you don't wish it, but I can't help thinking he'd be better not left alone."

"Why?" said Guest impetuously,

Mrs. Brade tapped her forehead, and Guest frowned angrily.

"Nonsense, my good woman," he cried; "don't exaggerate, and pray don't jump at conclusions. Mr. Stratton is no more mad than you are."

"That aint saying much, mister," cried the porter from the next room, where he was making up for late hours consequent upon sitting up for occupants of the inn. "My missus is as mad as a hatter."

Mrs. Brade darted to the door and closed it with a heavy bang, following it up by snatching, more than drawing the curtain over the opening—a curtain originally placed there to keep off draughts, but so used by Mrs. Brade as to give the onlooker the idea that her husband was a personage kept on exhibition, and not shown save as a favor and for money paid.

"I don't know what I could be thinking of to marry such a man, sir," she said indignantly. "Mad, indeed! Not mad enough to take more than's good for me, and pretty often, too."

"A lesson for you, Mrs. Brade," said Guest sternly, "You cannot make a more painful or dangerous assertion about a person than to say that a person or personage is mad."



## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### WALKING IN THE DARK.

**D**ISAPPOINTED in his visit to the inn, Guest went back to his own chambers, where his first act on reaching his room, with its lookout over the old rookery, was to take out his pocketbook, and carefully examine a photograph—a proof intrusted to his care that day—and which he instantly pressed to his lips several times before restoring it to its envelope, and returning it to his breast.

His next proceeding was to light his pipe, lie back, and think over Miss Jerrold's words; and the more he thought over them the more they seemed to fit with the situation.

One thought begat another till he grew startled at the growth emanating from Miss Jerrold's suggestion.

Stratton had always been greatly attached to him, he knew, but he did not always confide in him; he had a way of being extremely reticent, especially over money matters, and he recalled a little upset they had once had about a time when Stratton was hard pressed to get his rent ready and had raised the money in what he (Guest) had dubbed a disreputable way—that is to say, he had borrowed from “a relative” instead of from his friend.

“The old lady's right,” mused Guest, after a long period of thinking, during which his ideas seemed to ripen. “Mr. Brettison must know, and depend upon it, he, being such a particular, high-souled man, was angry with Stratton, and would not come to the wedding. Of course; I remember now, Stratton did say that morning that Brettison was off, out collecting. Now, how to find out where he has gone.”



No idea came, for Brettison was one of the most erratic and enthusiastic of beings. Being very wealthy, and living in the simplest way, money was no object; and he would go off anywhere, and at any cost, to obtain a few simple and rare plants for his herbarium. As Guest mused over the matter, he recollected that Stratton said something about the south; but whether it was south of England, France, or Italy, he could not remember.

"Might be the South Pole," he muttered pettishly. "Fancy that old chap having nothing better to do with his money than spend it over weeds!"

"Now, if I had half," he said, after refilling his pipe, "I could go to the old admiral and say—— Oh, what a fool I am!"

But somehow that idea about Brettison and his money seemed to pervade his brain for the next few days, and to be mixed up with Stratton and his troubles. He recollected the money lying in crisp banknotes upon the table, and recalled that it was a heavy sum. That was an entirely fresh view to take; could Stratton have borrowed that money from Brettison? Likely enough, and that might have caused the estrangement. People did not like lending money. They would offer to do so, but when the demand was made they were a little bitter.

"'Neither a borrower nor a lender be,'" muttered Guest, quoting from his favorite author, and then adding, "if you can help it."

"Bah! That upsets the idea of the lady in the case," he muttered impatiently. "What a fool I am! As if it was likely that poor old Mal would try to make his quietus with a bare bodkin—modernized into a six-shooter—because old Brettison was huffed at his borrowing money. I must pump it out of the poor fellow somehow."

That evening he went to Stratton's chambers, but could get no reply; and he waited about on the stairs till, growing



uneasy and suspicious once more, he knocked again, and listened at the letter slit.

Just then he heard steps, and the occupant of the upstairs chambers ascended to the landing.

"How do?" he said. "Mr Stratton's out. I met him on the Embankment not half an hour ago."

That swept away the black, mental cobwebs once more for a time about Guest's brain, and he went away relieved—but not before writing his intention of dropping in about ten that night, and thrusting his card in at the slit—to dine at his club, after which he went into the library to read up some old legal cases, and think about Edie.

He was punctual to the time appointed in Benchers' Inn, but there was no light in Stratton's window, none in Brettison's, and he waited till eleven in the expectation of seeing his friend come back.

At the above hour he became convinced that Stratton had returned early and gone to bed, so he went to his own chambers vexed and irritated, after dropping another card into the letter box, making an appointment for the next evening at seven.

"Take him out for a bit of dinner. He seems to be very busy just now, or else he is behaving very sensibly and taking exercise to get back his strength."

Guest went to Benchers' Inn the next evening at seven, but the outer door was closed, and after waiting for some time he went off to his club and wrote a letter begging Stratton to make an appointment to see him.

Next day glided by and there was no reply. The chambers were still closed, and the Brades had not seen their occupant; neither had Mr. Brettison come back.

Guest made light of the matter, and then went and called on the admiral, who promptly begged him to stay to dinner, but the young man refused, glanced at Edie, and stayed.



This delayed the visit which he had intended to pay Miss Jerrold, but he went to her on the following day to report his ill success, and then to the great institution where his friend ruled over the natural history specimens.

To his surprise Stratton was not there, one of the officials informing him that his chief had taken a month's vacation to recover his health.

"He seemed so broken down, sir, by study, that the committee suggested it."

"And never said a word to me," thought Guest. "Well, the man who says poor old Mal is mad is a fool, but he certainly does act very queerly. Never mind. He'll come all right in time."

More days glided by, and Guest became alarmed, for he could get no tidings of Stratton. The chambers were always closed, and no notice was taken of the letters ; so he went to Bourne Square on business—he made a point of going there on business whenever he could—and was shown into the drawing room, where Myra greeted him very kindly, though he noted a peculiar, anxious, inquiring look in her eyes two or three times before she rose and left the room.

"Now, Mr. Guest," said Edie as soon as they were alone, "you have something to communicate?"

"Something I want to say, but don't be quite so business-like."

"I must," she said sharply. "Now tell me : something from—about Mr. Stratton."

He told her of his ill success, and she frowned.

"We don't want his name mentioned here, and we take not the slightest interest in him ; but as you are interested, and as news, of course you can tell me anything, But isn't his conduct very strange?"

"More than strange."

"And you can't find Mr. Brettison either?"

"No ; but I'm not surprised at that. He's collecting



chickweed and 'grundsels,' as Mrs. Brade calls it, somewhere. But I shall be glad when he comes back."

Edie sat thoughtfully for a few minutes.

"You see, directly you cannot get to see him because his doors are shut you begin to think something is wrong."

"Naturally."

"And that's absurd, Percy—Mr. Guest."

"No ; no ; don't take it back again like that," he pleaded.

"Mr. Guest," she said emphatically. "Now look here : he must come to his chambers sometimes, because he would want his letters."

"Possibly," said the visitor coldly, for that formal "Mr. Guest" annoyed him.

"And he communicates with the people at the institution."

"Yes, but he has given them no fresh address."

"Then naturally they write to his chambers, and Mal—this man gets his letters from time to time. There's nothing shocking the matter. He is avoiding you, and wants to break off the intimacy."

"Then he is not going to," said Guest with spirit. "I'm afraid he has done something wrong some time."

"Indeed ?" said Edie, with her eyes twinkling.

"I mean, men do."

"Oh !"

"I have, lots of times."

Edie grew a little more stately—a hard task, for she was too *petite* to look dignified.

"I don't mean anything bad," said Guest hastily ; "and if old Mal thinks he is going to get rid of me he's mistaken. I'm not a woman, to throw a fellow over because he's had some trouble in the past. I forgive him whatever it is."

"I suppose wicked people find it easy to forgive other sinners ?" said Edie demurely.



"Of course. Poor old lad!" said Guest thoughtfully; "I wonder what he did do."

"I'd rather not discuss such matters, if you please, Mr. Guest," said Edie coldly.

"Oh, very well, Miss Perrin. I thought I could come to you for help and counsel as a very dear friend, if as nothing else, and, now I want your help, you back out."

"No, I don't—Percy."

"Ah!"

Only that interjection, but it meant so much in words—and acts, one of which resulted in the fair young girl pointing to the chair from which Guest had risen, and saying, with a little flush in her cheeks;

"Suppose somebody had come into the room. Sit down, please, Mr. Guest."

He obeyed.

"Now come; help me," he said. "We must forgive poor old Malcolm, whatever it is; and one of these days perhaps, someone else will."

"No, never: that is impossible."

"But what can he have done?"

"I don't know, unless he has been married before, and killed his wife so as to get married again."

Guest looked at her in horror, and she turned scarlet.

"I—I beg your pardon," she stammered. "I did not mean that."

"No," said Guest dryly. "I should think not."

Farther conversation was stayed by the entrance of Myra, looking rapt and strange, as if in a dream. She did not seem to notice them, but walked across to the window, and, as she went, Guest was shocked by the alteration in her aspect. It was as if she had lately risen from a bed of sickness, while that which struck him most was the weary, piteous aspect of her eyes.



As she turned them upon him at last it was in a questioning way, which he interpreted to mean, "I am dying for news of him, but it is impossible for me to ask"; and a curious feeling of resentment rose within him against Stratton, for he felt that he had literally wrecked the life of as true a woman as ever breathed.

A faint smile dawned upon her lips, and she glanced from him to Edie and back—a look which made the crimson on Edie's cheeks grow deeper, as the girl said quickly :

"Mr. Guest came to tell me how hard he is trying to get some news, and what he has done."

"News!" cried Myra excitedly, and her hands were raised toward their visitor, but she let them drop to her sides as her brows contracted.

"He has been telling me that he has——"

"Where is papa—has he come back?" said Myra, coldly ignoring her cousin's proffered information, and a few minutes later Guest shook hands and went away.

"Her pride keeps her silent," he said thoughtfully. "No wonder, but she'd give the world to hear the least bit of news. Poor girl! She'd forgive him almost anything. I must, and will, find it all out before I've done."

But the days grew into weeks, and Guest's visits to Bourne Square were always barren of news, save that he was able to announce that Stratton certainly did go to his chambers now and then. This he found out from the porter's wife, who bitterly bewailed the state into which they were falling.

"You may shake your head at me, Mr. Guest," she said, "and it's our secret, for not a word shall ever leave my lips, but let me ask you, is it in the behavior of a gentleman as has got all his change——"

"Got all his—— Oh, I see, you mean his senses."

"Why, of course, sir, to keep his rooms shut up as he does, and never a duster or a brush put inside the door."



"He is afraid of his specimens being disturbed, Mrs. Brade."

"Oh, dear, no, sir. It never was his way. I'd got used to his manners and customs—we understood each other, and if I lifted up a bottle or a specimen, whether it was a bird or only a bone, down it went in the same place again, so exact that you couldn't tell it had been moved."

"But Mr. Brettison does the same, Mrs. Brade."

"Him, sir?" said the woman contemptuously; "that's different. One knows he's a little bit queer. It's nothing new for him to be away months together, and then come back loaded with rubbidge."

"When did you say Mr. Stratton came here last?"

"Four day's ago, sir, and I went after him, and begged and prayed of him, with a pail and broom in my hand, to let me do him up, but he only pynted downward like a man in a play; and there's his place going to rack and ruin."

"Next time he comes, Mrs. Brade," said Guest, slipping a sovereign into her hand, "send your husband on to me directly and try and keep Mr. Stratton till he comes back."

"That I will, sir," she cried eagerly; and she kept her word over and over again, but to Guest's intense chagrin always too late.

"Just comes in quickly, sir, runs up to his rooms and gets his letters, and goes out the other way."

This occurred till Guest grew damped, then angry, then damped again; but, in spite of his disheartened state, he manfully resumed his search, for whenever he was disposed to give it up as what he called a bad job, he was forced on by Edie with the greatest eagerness—"to save *her* life."

There was a time when Guest thought of getting professional help, but a strange dread of something terrible being wrong kept him back from this, and he spent every spare hour in seeking for his friend in every resort, but all in vain. Still he heard of him again and again, and of his



calling at the institution, where he had a fresh release from duty granted him for a month ; and feeling that he was bound to run against his friend sooner or later, Guest relaxed his efforts, and the very next day caught sight of Stratton in a cab, followed it till it turned down one of the Strand *culs-de-sac*, saw him alight at a great house overlooking the river and pay the cabman ; and then followed him in, and up a great winding stone staircase to a door on the upper floor.

"She lives there," thought Guest with a feeling of rage in his breast, and, running lightly up the last few steps, he crept unobserved behind Stratton, and laid a hand upon his shoulder just as he was thrusting a latchkey into the lock.

Stratton gave a violent start, but did not turn round. He only uttered a low sigh.

"Very well," he said. "I have been expecting you for weeks."

"Stratton !" cried Guest reproachfully, and his friend turned slowly round so haggard and aged a countenance that Guest was startled.

"You ?" said Stratton, with a curious, dazed look around, as if for someone else whom he had expected to see there. "I thought—I thought——" He paused, and then after an interval : "Well, you have found me. What do you want ?"

Guest did not reply for the moment, but looked sharply from his friend to the door and back.

"There is someone in there !" he said to himself ; "and for Myra's sake I will know the truth."

Then aloud :

"Take me into your room ; we can't talk here."

Stratton made a quick movement before the door as if to keep him back.



## CHAPTER XXIX.

### ARCH PLOTTERS.

STRATTON opened the door without a word. Guest followed him in, to find himself in a plainly furnished sitting room, beyond which seemed to be the bedroom, while the two windows looked out westward over the Thames.

There was no sign of feminine occupation, and Guest felt staggered.

"Well," said Stratton bitterly, "you do not answer me. What do you want?"

"You to be the same fellow I always knew. Why have you come here?"

"You are inquisitorial, but I'll answer: Because it suits me. My rooms yonder are dark and depressing. I am ill, and want to sit here and breathe the fresh air and think. Is there anything wonderful in that?"

"No; but you need not play hide-and-seek with your friends."

"I have no friends," said Stratton coldly. "I am not the first man who ever took to a solitary life. It suits my whim. Now, please go and leave me to myself."

"Very well," said Guest, after a momentary hesitation; and he rose. "You have no friends?" he said.

"None."

"Well, I have," said Guest. "You are one of them, and you'll tell me I'm right some day."

Stratton did not take the hand extended to him, and Guest went out by no means disconcerted, but contented and pleased with his day's work.



"Something to tell Edie," he said to himself joyously ; and he hurried up to the admiral's to communicate his news.

"That's a step forward," the girl cried eagerly ; "now you must go on. Persevere."

"I will," he said, catching her enthusiasm.

"Don't let him drive you away."

"Indeed I will not," cried Guest, "only you might let me hold your hands."

"Stuff ; they are quite safe."

"For me ?" he whispered passionately.

"Percy Guest, do you know the meaning of the word *taboo* ? Yes, I see you do by your sour look."

"Not sour, Edie—disappointed."

"Because you are selfish, sir. All we have to do in this life is to study others."

"Oh ! Is it ?" he protested.

"Yes, and I now vow, swear, and declare that I will never even think of being happy myself till I can see Myra herself again ; so now you know what to expect."

"Oh, very well," he said with a dissatisfied look. "But look here, Edie, if I don't turn up some day you'll know what it means."

"That you will be found at your chambers with a pistol in your hand ?" said Edie contemptuously.

"Do you think I should be such an idiot ?" he cried indignantly.

The look she gave him made peace, and at last Guest rose to go, looking very thoughtful.

"Yes !" cried Edie, watching him merrily.

"I didn't know I spoke," he said, "but I was thinking that the way to put matters straight again would be to bring them together somehow."

"Oh, indeed !" said Edie sarcastically ; but Guest was too intent upon his thoughts to notice her manner, and he went on dreamily :



"Of course, Stratton could not come here now."

"I should not advise him to do so while uncle's about."

"No, of course not," continued Guest. "But I was thinking whether it would be possible for Myra to go, of course with you, and—perhaps I could arrange it—catch him at his chambers. He would explain everything to her, I'm sure, and you see perhaps after all it may not be so bad."

"Oh, no, perhaps not," said Edie, with a sneering intonation which escaped Guest in his infatuation over his new idea for serving two people whom he esteemed. Then, unable to control herself, she burst out with: "Oh, how can people be so stupid! As if it were possible that Myra could ever speak to such a man again."

It gradually dawned upon Guest that he had made a terrible blunder, and he went back to his chambers snubbed and fully determined never more to risk his position with Edie by trying to fight his friend's battle and piece together the broken fibers of the suddenly disrupted skein.

He was no little surprised, then, some weeks later, after dining at the admiral's and listening to several of the old man's old sea stories, to find Edie, upon reaching the drawing room, revive the idea as they sat talking together in a low tone, while Myra played, and her father took his nap.

"Don't talk about it," he said softly. "Every man makes a fool of himself sometimes. I suppose I did then."

"There does not seem to be much foolishness in trying to serve others," whispered Edie.

"I say, don't," said Guest in a low tone after gazing wonderingly in his companion's face. "You are laying a trap for me to fall into, and it's too bad."

"No, I'm not, Percy," she replied. "I've thought a great deal since about what you said. I was very indignant then, but now I think quite differently."

"You do?"



"Yes. Why should we study etiquette, and be punctilious when other people's life's happiness is concerned?"

"Well, that's what I thought, but you jumped upon me."

"I didn't, sir. I only said——"

"Enough to make me miserable for days. That's all."

"Please forgive me, Percy."

"Jump on me again, Edie," he whispered passionately—"ten times, a hundred times as hard, so as to ask forgiveness again like that."

"If you are so stupid, I will not say another word."

"Mute as a fish."

"Can't you understand how wretched it must make Myra feel to see other people happy?"

"Then you are happy, little one?"

"No, and I never shall be while matters are like this. Hush, speak low, and as if we were talking about pictures and Monday Pops. Now tell me, how does Malcolm seem?"

"More mad and wretched than ever."

"And you can't win his confidence at all?"

"Not a bit. I go and see him every day, generally at that place of his in Sarum Street, though I sometimes catch him at the inn, for he has a habit of going there at a certain time, and I found it out."

"Well?"

"He insults me, bullies me, threatens me, says everything he can think of to break with me; but I go all the same."

"That's right. I like men to be faithful to their friends."

"Hah!" Guest gave vent to a sigh of satisfaction.

"But you can't get him to confide in you?"

"No."

"You must be very stupid."

"That's it."

"I am sure I could get him to confide in me."



"You? Why, you'd win the confidence of a Memnon."

"Don't be silly. But tell me, Percy—do you think, now, that Malcolm Stratton has been very wicked? I mean, do you think he has married anyone else?"

"No," said Guest flatly, "I feel sure he hasn't."

"Then we will have the matter cleared up."

"How?"

"Myra shall go and see him, and ask him why he has treated her so badly."

"But it will be such bad form."

"I don't care what it is! It would be much worse form for us to let the poor thing take to her bed and die."

"But surely she is not so bad as that," whispered Guest, who felt moved by the sob he heard in his companion's throat.

"Worse, worse," whispered Edie. "You don't see what I do. You don't know what I do. Breaking hearts are all poets' nonsense, Percy, but poor Myra is slowly wasting away from misery and unhappiness. Uncle doesn't see it, but I know, and if something isn't done soon I shall have no one left to love."

"Edie!"

"I mean like a sister. O Percy, I'd rather see her forgive him and marry him, however wicked he has been, than live like this."

A few chords in a minor key floated through the drawing room, and Edie shivered.

"Tell me," she said after a few minutes, "do you think he acted as he did because he didn't love her—because he felt that he couldn't take a woman who had been engaged to someone else?"

"I'm sure he loves her with all his heart, and I feel as certain that he would not let such a thing stand in his way."



“Then I’m reckless,” said Edie excitedly. “I don’t care a bit what the world may say. Myra shall go to him and see him.”

“She would not.”

“I’ll make her, and if uncle kills me for it afterward—well, he must.”

“I should like to catch him trying to,” said Guest.

“No, no ; I don’t mean that. Then what do think of my plan ?” said Edie. “You should come here to fetch us to some exhibition—to see something ; any evening would do. We could let them be together for a little while and then bring them back.”

“Capital !” said Guest ; “only isn’t that my plan, little one ?”

“Oh, what does it matter which of us thought of it ?”

“Not a bit,” he said, pressing the hand that lay so near him ; and a little later on, with the understanding that if Myra would consent the attempt should be made, Guest left the house.



## CHAPTER XXX.

### AT HER OWN HEART'S BIDDING.

SOME time elapsed before the announcement that the consent had been won.

"She wanted to all the while," Edie said ; "but her woman's dignity kept her back."

The girl was quite right, and it was only in a fit of mad despair that Myra had at last agreed in acknowledging the force of her cousin's words.

"Percy says he thinks Malcolm is slowly dying, dear, and that your coming might save his life."

"I'll go," Myra said, drawing in her breath with a hiss ; and then to herself, "If he despises me for the act, well, I must bear it, too—while I am here."

An evening was fixed, one on which Guest felt sure he would be able to catch his friend at the chambers, as being the preferable place, though, failing this, there was the lodging in Sarum Street.

There was no occasion for inventing subterfuges. The admiral that night dined at the club, and he troubled himself so little about the comings and goings of his daughter and niece that, if he returned, he would only consider that they had gone to some "at home," and retire to his bed.

The consequence was that the carriage was in waiting at eight, and Guest arrived to act as guide.

"Strikes me, William," said Andrews, the butler, to the attendant footman, "that our young lady would be doing more what's right if she stopped at home."

"Ay, she do look bad, sir."

"She does, William," said Andrew, with a little stress on



the "does." "Twice over me and you has made preparations to have her married, and it strikes me that the next time we have to do with any public proceedings it will be to take her to her long home."

"They're a-coming down, Mr. Andrews," whispered the footman as, in evening dress and cloak, Guest brought down Myra, looking very white in her muffings, and as if she were in some dream.

Guest handed her into the carriage, and returned for Edie, who was flushed and agitated.

"You won't think any the worse of me for this, Percy, will you?" she whispered.

His reply was a tender pressure of the little hand which rested upon his arm.

Matters having been intrusted to Guest he directed the coachman to draw up beside the old court in Counsel Lane, and upon the footman opening the door, and the ladies being handed out, he looked at them in wonder, and asked his fellow-servant what game he thought was up as the trio passed into a gloomy looking alley, at whose corner was a robemaker's shop with two barristers' wigs on blocks in the window.

But Guest knew what he was about. The courts and alleys about Benchers' Inn were principally occupied by law writers, printers, and law stationers, and deserted enough of an evening to render the passage through of a couple of ladies in evening dress a matter likely to cause little notice, especially as they might be taking a short cut to one of the theaters.

Myra had taken Guest's arm at a whisper from her cousin, who followed close behind, and, before long, the young barrister was well aware of her agitation and weakness, for, as they reached the upper entrance to the inn, she leaned more and more heavily upon his arm, and, after a few more paces, clung to him and stopped.



"Tired?" he said gently; "we are nearly there."

She tried to speak, but no words would come; he could feel, though, that she was trembling violently, and Edie pressed to her side.

"Courage," she murmured; and her voice seemed to calm Myra, who drew a deep breath, and tried to walk firmly the rest of the way; while Edie began to hope Stratton would be absent, for she dreaded the scene.

But fate was against her this time. The meeting she had struggled to bring about was to be, for Guest turned to her and whispered over his shoulder:

"There is a light in his room; he is at home."

There was not a soul visible as they crossed the little, silent, ill-paved courtyard, with its few flickering gas lamps and the buildings around standing up blank and bare, for the most part solitary and deserted looking, for hardly a blind showed a light behind.

Halfway along by the railings, beneath the great plane trees, a man was standing; and, as he took a step out into the light of the nearest lamp, Guest felt that Myra was ready to drop. But a whispered word or two roused her to make the last effort, and the next minute they were in the doorway; with the stone stairs looking dim and strange, visible where they stood, but gradually fading into the darkness above.

Guest stopped short in obedience to a pressure upon his arm, and Myra supported herself by grasping the great wooden balustrade, while Edie uttered a sigh, and their escort began to feel some doubt as to the result of their mission, and wonder whether it was wise to have come, even going so far as to feel that he should not be sorry if his companions drew back.

Just then Edie whispered a few words to her cousin, who seemed to be spurred by them to fresh exertion, and, bearing hard upon Guest's arm once more, she ascended



the silent staircase to the first floor, where Guest led them a little aside into Brettison's entry, while he went to reconnoiter.

All was dark, apparently, and he began to be in doubt as to whether Stratton really was there, when, to his great delight, he found that fate had favored their visit, for the outer door was ajar, and, drawing it back, he stepped inside, to find the inner door only just thrust to, while, after opening it a little way, he could see Stratton seated at his writing table with his face resting upon his hands.

The lamp was before him, with the shade thrust on one side, so that the light was cast toward the window, and his face and hands were in darkness ; and so motionless did he seem that Guest concluded that he must be asleep.

Guest gave a sharp look round, but the room was too dim for much to be seen. It did not, however, by that light appear to be neglected.

There was an angular look in Stratton's attitude which startled Guest, and made him step forward with his heart beating heavily. The unfastened door was terribly suggestive of the entrance of a man who hardly knew what he was doing, and he now saw that a hat was lying on the floor as if it had fallen from the table. In an ordinary way such ideas would not have occurred to him, but he had twice over visited that room, and been startled by matters which had suggested Stratton's intention of doing away with his life.

All this made Guest walk quickly up behind his friend's chair, and his hand was raised to touch him, but he drew back, for a sigh, long drawn and piteous, broke the silence of the dim room—such a sigh as escapes from a sleeping child lying exhausted after some passionate burst of temper.

Guest, too, drew a long breath as he crept away softly, looking over his shoulder till he reached the doors, through which he passed, and hurried over the few steps along the



landing to where Myra and Edie stood shivering in the cold, dark entry leading to Brettison's chambers.

"Oh, how long you have been," whispered Edie, to whom Myra was clinging.

"Come, Mrs. Barron," said Guest, without heeding the remark, as he took Myra's hand, which struck cold through her glove, and drew it through his arm.

"Wait there, Edie."

The girl uttered a faint ejaculation, but said nothing, and Myra walked silently to Stratton's door, and as Guest raised his hand to draw it toward him she pressed it back.

"Wait," she said in a hoarse whisper. "My brain seems to swim. Mr. Guest, let me think for a moment of what I am going to do before it is too late."

Guest waited, half supporting her, for she hung heavily upon his arm, but she did not speak.

"I will tell you," he said gently; "you are going like some good angel to solace a man dying of misery and despair. I do not know the cause of all this, but I do know that Malcolm Stratton, who has always been as a brother to me, loves you with all his heart."

"Yes—yes," whispered Myra excitedly.

"And that some terrible event—some sudden blow, caused him to act as he did on his wedding morning. Myra Jerrold," he continued solemnly, "knowing Malcolm as I do, I feel that he must have held back for your sake, taking all the burden of his shame upon him so that you should not suffer."

"Yes," she said in her low, excited whisper; "that is what I have been feeling all these weary, weary days. It is that thought which has sustained me, and made me ready to sacrifice so much—pride, position, the opinion of my friends—in coming here like this."

"Your cousin is here," said Guest quickly. "We shall not leave."



"No, you will not leave me," she said, holding his arm with both her hands.

"Now, be firm," whispered Guest, "and think of why you have come."

"To forgive him," she said slowly.

"I believe there is nothing to forgive," said Guest warmly. "No : you come as his good angel to ask him by his love for you to be open and frank, and tell you why he has acted thus. He will not speak to me, his oldest friend : he cannot refuse you. But mind," he continued earnestly, "it must not be told you under the bond of secrecy ; he must tell you truly, and leave it to us afterward to decide what is best to be done."

"Yes," she said, speaking more firmly now, "I understand. I have come to help the man who was to have been my husband, in his sore time of trial. The feeling of shame, degradation, and shrinking has passed away. Percy Guest, I am strong now, and I know. It is no shameless stooping on my part : I ought to have come to him before."

"God bless you for that, Myra !" he whispered earnestly, and he bent down and kissed her hands. As he raised his head he found that Edie had crept forward, and was looking at him wildly from out of her little fur-edged hood.

For the moment Guest thought nothing of all this, but at a sign from Myra drew open the outer door, and she stood in the dimly lit entry as if framed ; she let her hood fall back, and gazed straight before her into the quaintly furnished room as if wondering that she did not at once see the object of her thoughts.

Then they saw her take a couple steps forward, and, as if from habit, thrust to the inner door, shutting in the scene beyond, and leaving Guest and Edie in the gloom of the landing.



## CHAPTER XXXI.

### FROM HOPE TO FEAR.

FOR a few moments nothing was said, and Guest paid no heed to his companion, but stood bent forward listening for some exclamation of surprise uttered by Stratton, or a word from Myra.

But all was silent as the grave, and, with his pulses increasing the rapidity of their beats, he gazed at the faint, narrow streak of light, almost within reach of his hand, where the edge of the inner door was within a quarter of an inch of the jamb.

“Ought I to have let her go in alone?” he asked himself. “Ought I not to have sent in Edie, too—is there any risk?”

Then, quick as lightning, followed thought after thought as to the peril to which, through his and Edie’s scheming, Myra might be exposed; and he saw himself afterward face to face with father and aunt, bearing the brunt of their reproaches for what now began to seem a wild escapade.

He was brought back to himself in the midst of the semi-darkness by a low, catching sigh, and he turned sharply round to see behind him, as in another frame, the outlined figure of Edie,

He took a step toward her quickly, but she drew back right to the great balustrade of the landing, and supported herself against it.

“Edie,” he whispered, trying to take her hand; but she repulsed him, and turned her back to look down the opening to the hall.



"Edie," he said again quickly ; and this time he caught her hand.

"Don't touch me !" she said in a low, passionate whisper.

"Nonsense, dear ! There is no danger, I think. We must not stay here listening : it would be so unfair. Come and stand in Mr. Brettison's passage. You will be out of the draught and cold."

"Don't touch me, I say," she whispered angrily ; and she drew her hand from his grasp with a sharp snatch.

"Don't be foolish," he said excitedly. "Come along here."

"No—no—no."

"But, Edie, dear !"

"How dare you !" she cried quite aloud.

"Edie ! Can you not trust me ?" he said reproachfully. "It was for your sake I spoke. People may be coming up or going down. Let's go back to Mr. Brettison's door."

"No," she said hoarsely ; "I will stay here."

"But there is no need," he said gently. "I know what you feel in your anxiety about Myra ; but really there is no need. Come."

He tried to take her hand again, but she recoiled from him so suddenly that her little hood fell back, and, dim though the staircase landing was, he could see the bright little face before him convulsed with anger, and that her eyes literally flashed.

"Edie !" he whispered, "how can you be so foolish ! I tell you I will answer for Myra's safety there with my life if you like."

"Myra !" she said in an angry whisper ; "do you think I was considering her ? I—oh, it is too much. How could I be so mad and stupid as to—as to—come !"



Guest gazed at her wonderingly. At first he merely attributed her actions to her anxiety on her cousin's behalf, but her words contradicted that ; and, utterly astounded, he stammered out :

" Edie—speak to me—have I offended you ? What have I done ?

" Oh, nothing. It is I who have been foolish," she said hysterically. " Girls are so silly sometimes."

" Then there is something," he said eagerly. " I have offended you. Edie, dear, pray tell me."

He took hold of her unwilling hand and, in spite of her effort, drew it through his arm, and led her toward the short passage in which Brettison's door was placed.

" You don't answer me," he whispered as they reached the spot where she and her cousin had waited only a short time before, and his love for her speaking now warmly in the tone of his voice. " Edie, dearest, I would suffer anything sooner than give you pain. Forgive me if I have done anything ; forgive me, too, for speaking out so plainly at a time like this, but I do love you, darling, indeed—indeed."

As he spoke he raised her hand passionately, and yet reverently, to his lips, and the next moment he would have pressed it warmly, but the kiss was upon vacancy, for the hand was sharply snatched away.

" It is all false !" cried Edie in a low, angry voice. " I do not believe a word."

" Edie ! " he whispered reproachfully.

" Do you think I am blind ? Do you think because I am so young that I am a child ? "

" I—I don't know what you mean," he faltered, utterly taken aback by the silent vehemence of the passion displayed by the quivering little lady before him.

" It is not true. You are deceiving me. You, too, whom I did think honest and true. But you are all alike, and I *was* mad to come—no, I was not, for I'm very glad I did,



if it was only to learn that you are as full of duplicity as your friend."

"Am I? Well, I suppose so, Edie, if you think so," he said dismally. "But we came here to try and get out of a fog—I've got farther in. I didn't know I was such a bad one, though, and you might be fair to me and explain. Come," he cried, changing his manner, and speaking out in a frank, manly way, "this is not like you, little woman. If it's to tease me and keep me at a distance because we are alone here in the dark it is not needed, Edie, for God knows that if a man ever loved a woman, I do you."

"What!" she cried; "and act toward Myra as I saw just now?"

"Toward Myra?"

"Yes; I know she's a hundred times nicer than I am, but I did think—I did think—— O Percy, how could you kiss her hand like that?"

He caught her to his breast as she broke down into a fit of sobbing, and held her there.

"O Edie," he said, "you silly, blind little thing! Why, I never even thought—oh, but go on—go on," he whispered; "I am so glad—jealous of me like that! Then you do love me dearly, and you can't deny it now."

Edie made little effort to escape from the close encircling arms which held her tightly, fluttering like a bird; none to deny Guest's charge. It was very lonely and dark upon that staircase, and in another moment she would have been shrinking from her companion's kisses; but, moved by the same impulse, they sprang apart, for from Stratton's room a wild, appealing cry broke the silence of the echoing stairs.



## CHAPTER XXXII.

### A WOMAN WOOES—IN VAIN.

“**N**O, no, don't come with me,” whispered Guest as he sprang toward Stratton's room, but Edie paid no heed to his words, and was close behind him as he passed through first one and then the other door, drawing back, though, the next moment to close them both.

A few minutes before when Myra had performed the same action she had stood gazing before her at the figure seated at the table ; and the attitude of dejection, the abject misery and despair it conveyed to her mind, swept away all compunction. Every thought of her visit being unmaidenly, and opposed to her duty toward herself and those who loved her, was forgotten. Her hands were involuntarily raised toward him, and she stood there with her lips apart, her head thrown back, and her eyes half closed and swimming with tenderness as her very being seemed to breathe out the one word—“Come !”

But Stratton might have been dead for all the change that took place by that dimly lit table. He did not stir ; and at last, seeing that he must be suffering terribly, and, taking the thought closely to her breast that it was for her sake, she moved forward slowly, almost gliding to the back of his chair, to stand there looking down yearningly upon him till her bosom heaved with a long, deep sigh, and raising her hands toward him once more she laid them tenderly upon his head.

“Malcolm !”

The effect of that touch was electric. With one bound Stratton leapt from his chair toward the fireplace, and



there stood at bay, as it were, before the door of the closet, gazing at her wildly for a few moments, as if at some unreal thing. Then his hands went to his brow, and the intensity of his gaze increased till, as she took one step toward him with extended arms, the wild look in his haggard face changed to one of intense joy.

“Myra!” he cried, and the next moment he had clasped her in his arms.

For the moment it was a different man from the wretched being who had crept back to his rooms heartsick and despairing, while, after shrinking from him with the reserve begotten of the doubt and misery which had been her portion for so long past, the warm clasp of his arms, the tender, passionate words he uttered, and the loving caresses of his hands as he drew her face closer and closer to his swept away all memories of his lapse, and of the world and its ways. He had held her to his throbbing breast—he, the man to whom her heart had first expanded two years before—and she knew no more, thought no more of anything but the supreme joy that he loved her dearly still.

Brief pleasure. She saw his eyes gazing passionately into hers, full of the newly found delight, and then they contracted, his brow grew rugged, and, with a hoarse sigh, he shrank from her embrace, looked wildly round, and then, with a shudder, whispered:

“You here—here! Here? It is you?—it is no dream; but why—why have you come? It is too horrible.”

“Malcolm!” she cried piteously.

“Don’t—don’t speak to me—don’t look at me with those appealing eyes. I cannot bear it. Pray—pray go.”

“Go?” she said, raising her hand to his arm, “when I have at all costs come to you like this!”

“Yes, yes, go—at once,” he cried, and he shrank from her as if in horror.



“Malcolm—dearest!” she moaned; “you shrink from me. What have I done?”

He was silent in the terrible struggle going on within his breast.

“You do not speak,” she whispered, as if in dread that her words should reach the ears of those without. “You cannot be so cruel as to cast me off for the past. I did not know then, dear—I was a mere girl—I accepted him heart whole. It was my father’s and his wish; do not blame me for that.”

He turned from her as if to avoid her eyes, and her voice grew more piteous as she crept close to him and stood with her hand raised to lay it upon his arm, but dreading to touch him again after his cold rebuff.

“I tell you, dear, I did not know then—I believed you cared for Edie.”

“I? Never!” he cried, turning to her for the moment. “Why do you revive all that?”

“Because you are so cruel to me—so cold, Malcolm, I must speak now. You have made me reckless—ready to brave the whole world’s contempt, my father’s anger, for the sake of him who first taught me what it was to love. I tell you I must speak now, and I come to you humble and suppliant—the woman you would have made your wife. It was too cruel, but I forgive you, dear. Let all that be as if it had never happened.”

He groaned, and covered his face with his hands.

“Speak to me, dearest,” she murmured; and, emboldened by his sorrowful manner, she clasped one of his arms with both her hands, and laid her cheek against it as she spoke. “Speak to me and tell me, too, that you forgive me all that sad time of my life. I tell you again I never loved him. Our marriage was the merest form, and I came back from the church wishing that my last hour had come. I know now; you need not tell me, dear—you shrank from me at the



last ; but you did not know my heart, Malcolm—you could not see how its every pulsation was for you. I lay it bare before you now, Malcolm—husband. I claim you, dear. I cannot live on like this, my own, my own.”

She had crept closer and closer as she spoke, her hands had risen to his shoulder, and, after trembling there for a few moments, they clasped his neck, and she buried her face in his breast, sobbing as if her heart would break.

Then her tears seemed to freeze in their source, and she shrank away horrified and chilled by his manner ; for he thrust her from him with an angry gesture, and his face was convulsed as he made as if to rush from the room.

But he turned back to her, and she sank upon her knees before him.

“ Malcolm,” she said gently, “ am I so loathsome in your sight ? ”

“ No, no,” he groaned, and he tore at his throat as if something choked him. “ For Heaven’s sake, go. Myra, I am not master of my actions. If you stay I shall forget all but that you are here.”

She started to her feet in horror and alarm at his words, and his looks seemed to indorse their truth, but a calm smile came upon her lips, and she went to him again.

“ I know,” she said tenderly. “ They have told me all that. You have been ill and delirious. Well, who should be your nurse and comforter? Malcolm—come to me again. My father will listen to my prayers, and all the past shall be forgotten. Take me with you away somewhere till you are well again. Only tell me now that you have forgiven me—that I am to be your wife, Malcolm—my own.”

A spasm of horror convulsed his face again, and he shrank from her when she would have once more laid her head upon his breast.



“No ; you do not know ; you cannot know,” he whispered hoarsely. “Myra, there is a gulf between us that can never more be crossed. Go, dearest, for Heaven’s sake, and try and forget that I ever said words of love.”

She looked at him in wonder more than dread, but the prime object of her mission came now to mind.

“No,” she said ; “your mind is disordered with grief. I cannot leave you like this. Tell me, I beg, Malcolm : you do repel me because of my past ?”

“No—no !” he said wildly. “For that ? Great Heavens, no !”

“Then you must—you shall tell me.”

“Tell you ?” he cried.

“Yes : what you have kept back from your firmest friend. It must be some terrible trouble—some great agony of spirit—that should induce you to raise your hand against your own life.”

“They told you that !” he said bitterly.

“Yes: they were obliged. But the reason, dear ? Did you not tell me I should share your very being—that I should be your other self ? Malcolm, tell me. I claim it as my right. Why are you like this ?”

He caught her hands fiercely, and held her at arm’s length.

“Tell you ?” he said ; “that you may loathe as well as hate. Myra, in the horror of the long black nights since I saw you last I have clung to the hope that, some time in the future, repentance, sorrow for what was thrust upon me, might be sufficient penance for the past ; but it is all one black cloud of despair before me. There is no hope. You and I must never meet again. Go, while I can speak to you the words of a sane man, before that which they have thought of me becomes true. For Heaven’s sake, go. God have mercy ; my punishment is greater than I can bear.”



He reeled, and would have fallen heavily, but Myra held on to the hands which clutched hers so fiercely ; and, as a wild appeal for help escaped her lips, she saved him from striking his head violently as he sank insensible to the floor.

“What is it ?” cried Guest excitedly.

She told him in a few words, and he ran into the other room for water, but Stratton was already coming to, and after drinking with avidity from the glass Guest held to his lips, he rose shuddering and pale.

“Take her home,” he said in a husky whisper as he rose. “Quick. It is too horrible. Weak and faint, I cannot bear it.”

He motioned toward the door, and Guest turned a look full of perplexity toward Myra.

“No,” she said firmly. “Edie, dear, stay with me. Mr. Guest, go to my father at once and tell him I am here with him who is to be my dear husband, who is sick almost unto death. Tell him to come at once with a doctor and a nurse.”

As she spoke a look of joy shot across Stratton’s face, and he took a step toward her with outstretched hands, where she stood between him and the door beside the fireplace. Then, all at once, his face changed, and they thought him mad.

“No,” he cried fiercely ; “it is impossible.”

He ran across, and flung open both inner and outer doors.

“Take them,” he whispered fiercely—“take them back, man, or it will be too late. You will make me what you think.”

Myra would have stayed even then, in spite of Edie’s hands trying to drag her away ; but, as she turned yearningly to Stratton, he shrank away with such a despairing look of horror that she yielded herself to Guest’s strong arm, and suffered him to lead her back, half insensible, to



the carriage, into a corner of which she sank with a low moan, while all the way home the beat of the horses feet and the rattle of the wheels upon the pavement seemed to form themselves with terrible iteration into the words she had heard fall from Stratton's lips, and she shuddered as now, for the first time, she gave them with a terrible significance :

"My punishment is greater than I can bear."

She grew more and more prostrate as they neared home, and was so weak that she could hardly walk up the steps into the hall, but she recovered a little, and, holding tightly by Guest's and Edie's arms, ascended slowly to the drawing room, to find that the butler had hurried up before them, and that Sir Mark had returned, and was coming to meet them on the landing, startled by the man's words :

"Miss Myra has come home, sir, very ill."

The admiral would have sent off for medical help, but Myra insisted that she was better ; and as she began to recover herself the old man asked eagerly :

"Where was it—at a theater?"

A dead silence fell upon the group, and Guest gave Edie a look of agony as the thought occurred to him : "He will forbid me his house now."

"Well," cried Sir Mark testily, for he had reached home early consequent upon a few monitory twinges, which he dare not slight, "are you all deaf?"

"I will tell you, dear," said Myra, taking her father's hand and pressing it beneath her cheek. "Don't be angry with anybody but me, and try and remember that I am no longer a girl, but a suffering woman, full of grief and pain."

"My poor darling!" he whispered, bending down to kiss her. "But tell me—were you taken ill at the theater? Why, what does it mean?"

"I could bear it no longer, father," said Myra slowly. "I have been to see Malcolm Stratton."



"What?"

"To ask him to explain."

"You—you have been to see that scoundrel—that——"

"Hush, dear! He was to have been my husband."

"And you—you actually went to see him—at his rooms?"

"Yes."

Sir Mark wiped his forehead, and looked fiercely from one to the other, as if hardly believing his child's avowal to be true.

"I could not go on like this. It was killing me, dear."

"And—and you asked him to explain his cursed conduct?"

"I asked him to explain."

"And—and—what—what?" panted the old man furiously.

"No; he did not explain, dear," said Myra, drawing her father's arm about her neck, and raising herself a little from the couch so as to nestle on his breast. "It is fate, dear. I am never to leave you now. Keep me, dear, and protect me. It is not his fault. Something terrible has happened to him—something he could not own to, even to me—who was to have been his wife."

"Edie—Guest—help!" panted the admiral. "Myra, my darling! She's dying!"

"No, no, dear," she said, with a low moan, as she clung to him more tightly, "a little faint—that's all. Ah! hold me to you, dear," she sighed almost in a whisper. "Safe—with you."

And then to herself:

"He said his punishment was greater than he could bear. Malcolm, my own—my own!"



## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### A HORRIBLE SUGGESTION.

ONLY a few frowns from the admiral and a severe shake of the head over their wine a day or two later, as, in obedience to a summons more than an invitation, Guest dined with him and his sister, Edie having her dinner with her cousin in Myra's room.

"I felt as if I ought to say a deal to you, young man," growled the admiral; "but poor Myra has given me my orders, and I must be mum. Take some more wine."

Guest took some more claret with pleasure, and thought that the subject was to be changed, but it was not, for Sir Mark suddenly turned to him:

"I say: look here, my lad," he said. "This Stratton: is he mad?"

"No," said Guest sharply: "certainly not."

"Then what the deuce is the matter with him?"

"That's what I'm going to find out, Sir Mark."

But the days went by, and Guest appeared to get no farther, save only that Stratton, in a despairing way, ceased to resent his friend's determination to be with him. He even went so far, one evening in his room in Sarum Street, as to show some return of his old confidence, for he tossed a letter across the table.

"Read that," he said.

Guest took it, and saw that it was from the governors of the great institution, suggesting that Stratton should resign his post for a twelvemonth, and go away on half salary to recoup his health.



"Humph! Can't say I'm surprised," said Guest. "Have you written?"

"Yes, and resigned entirely."

"Where's the letter?" said Guest eagerly. "Gone?"

"No; it is here."

"Let's look."

Stratton handed him the letter, and Guest tore it up.

"Write that you accept their considerate proposal."

"I cannot."

"But you shall."

"If I wrote so, I should feel bound to leave town."

"Very good. I'll go with you—to the South Pole if you like."

"I shall never leave London," said Stratton gravely.

"Then stop here and get well. Write."

The weaker will obeyed the stronger, and, with a sigh of satisfaction, Guest pocketed the letter to post.

"By the way," he said, "I came through the inn to-night on the chance of finding you there."

Stratton's face grew stony.

"And old Mother Brade got hold of me to practice her tongue upon."

Stratton was silent, and sat gazing straight before him.

"Hadn't you better let the old woman have a general clean up?"

"I pay the rent of those chambers," said Stratton almost fiercely, "to do with them as I please. No!"

"All right; tell her to go to Jericho, then. But look here, she was asking me about Mr. Brettison."

Stratton's countenance changed a little, either from excitement or interest in his friend's words.

"Isn't it strange that he doesn't come back?"

"I don't know. No. He is peculiar in his ways. Sometimes I have not seen him for months together."

"Oh," said Guest quietly; and soon after he left.



It was about a week later that, on going to the inn one evening, Guest was caught again by the porter's wife.

"Which I won't keep you a minute, sir, but would you mind answering me one question?"

"If I can," said Guest, knocking the ashes from his cigar.

"Then is Mr. Stratton coming back soon to the inn, sir?"

"I can't tell you, Mrs. Brade."

"Then can you tell me where Mr. Brettison is, sir?"

"That's two questions, Mrs. Brade."

"Well, yes ; sir, it is ; but if you only knew the agony I suffer from the thought of those two sets of chambers being allowed to go to rack and ruin, you'd pity me."

"Well, it does seem tiresome to any lady of orderly mind, of course."

"It's 'orrid, sir. There's the dust, and the soot falling down the chimbleys without a bit of fire, and the mice, and, for aught I know, the rats. Really, sir, there are times when I almost wish the chambers was empty, that I do."

"Well, have patience, Mrs. Brade," said Guest. "I think I can see an improvement in Mr. Stratton, and I hope soon to get him to come back—but I don't know when it's likely to be," he muttered as he crossed the square on the chance of seeing a light in his friend's window, and this time it was there.

He hurried up to find, after knocking several times, that Stratton had evidently only just come, for he was standing there in overcoat and hat, and he would have stepped out at once had not Guest shown so decided an intention of coming in.

"Do you want me?" said Stratton uneasily ; and Guest's heart sank, for his friend looked more careworn than ever.

"Yes," he said ; "I wanted to talk to you about something particular."



"Yes—what?" said Stratton sharply.

"Surely you were not coming away, and about to leave that lamp burning?"

"Was I going to leave the lamp burning?" said Stratton absently. "I suppose I forgot."

"Well, don't do that, then. This house is so full of wood that if it caught fire it would burn like tinder."

"You think so?" said Stratton with a curious look in his eyes.

"That I do. In half an hour there wouldn't be one of your preparations left. They, your furniture, the *bric-à-brac*, and your specimens in spirits, would be consumed and in ashes in no time."

The strange look in Stratton's eyes intensified, but Guest did not notice it, nor yet that his companion was letting his eyes wander around the old carved paneling with its oaken architraves and heavy plinths and moldings.

For Guest was intent upon his own thoughts.

"Look here," he said suddenly; "about Brettison?"

Stratton turned upon him uneasily.

"This is a rum world, Mal, old fellow."

"What do you mean?" said Stratton.

"Only this: Brettison's rich—a man worth a good deal, and men of that stamp generally have people who take a good deal of notice of them."

"Naturally," said Stratton, with a curious laugh.

"Suppose, then, he has come to grief. I mean, suppose some gang have got hold of him on his way back here and made an end of him."

"Absurd!" said Stratton, with a curious laugh. "Nonsense!"

"Such things have been done. When did he go out?"

"I do not know."

"Don't be huffy with your devoted servant, Mal. Tell me this—has he been back since—er—that day?"



"Perhaps. I don't know. He is a man who goes in and out as silently as a cat."

"But he used to come in and see you often?"

Stratton coughed to clear a huskiness from his throat.

"Yes; but he has not been to see me lately," he said hurriedly. "I am going home now."

"This is home, man."

Stratton suppressed a shudder, and Guest pitied him as he thought of two attempts made upon his life.

"It is too gloomy—too depressing for me."

"Give up the chambers, then, and take some more pleasant ones."

"No, no; I should not care about the trouble of moving. I am used to them, too."

He laid his hand upon the lamp, and Guest was obliged to take the hint and rise to go.

"That's right," he said; "put the lamp out safe. This is an ugly old place, but it would be horrible if the place were burned down."

"Yes—horrible—horrible!" said Stratton, with a shudder.

"Much more horrible if anyone slept in the place, eh?"

"If anybody slept in the place?" said Stratton with a ghastly look.

"Yes—lodgers. There is somebody upstairs on the second floor, isn't there?"

"Yes," said Stratton huskily, "but only in the day time." He withdrew his hand from the lamp, and looked round, to Guest's great delight; for he was taking an evident interest in the topic his friend had started, and his eyes roved from object to object in the room.

"Work of a good many years' saving and collecting here, old chap, eh?"

"Yes; of many, many years," said Stratton thoughtfully.



"And all your bits of antique furniture, too. Mustn't have a fire here, old fellow. I say," he continued, tapping a glass jar in which a kind of lizard was suspended in spirits, "I suppose if this grew hot the stopper would be blown out, and the spirit would blaze all over the floor in a moment?"

Stratton's eyes contracted strangely as he nodded and watched his friend.

"Yes," he said, "that is so."

"And you've got dozens of similar bottles about. Let's see, you've got something in your bathroom too."

Stratton made no reply, but stood gazing away from his friend.

"Wits wandering again," thought Guest. "Never mind, I did get him a little more like himself." Then aloud :

"I say, Mal."

Stratton turned upon him sharply.

"Wouldn't do to have a fire ; why, you'd burn up poor old Brettison too."

Stratton's face looked as if it had been carved in stone.

"Such a collection, too, as he has spent years of his life in getting together."

"Come away, now," said Stratton hoarsely, as he raised his hand once more to turn out the lamp.

"Yes ; all right. No ; stop !" cried Guest excitedly. Stratton smiled, and his hand remained as if fixed in the air.

"I have it," continued Guest.

Stratton did not speak, but remained there with his fingers close to the button of the lamp, as if fixed in that position by his friend's words.

"Look here, old fellow," cried Guest excitedly. "History does repeat itself."

"What—what do you mean?"

"How long is it since poor old Brettison had that terrible illness?"



"I don't know—years ; come away."

"Wait a moment. Well, he was lying helpless, dying, and you suspected something was wrong, broke open the old man's door, found him insensible, and nursed him back to life."

Stratton did not stir, but stood bent over the table, listening to his friend's words.

"Suppose he has come back unknown to you—as he often did—and gone in there. He is old. He may be lying there now. Mal, old chap, this place sends quite a chill through me. How do we know but what just on the other side yonder somebody may be lying dead?" and he pointed toward the closet door.

"Ah!"

No literary sign can give the exact sound of the hoarse sigh which escaped from Stratton as his friend said those last words excitedly : and then, as if spurred by his imagination :

"It's as likely as can be. Mal, old fellow, as I said before, history does repeat itself. He has been missing a long time. Mrs. Brade is very uneasy. You have been a great deal away. I tell you what it is—it's an act of duty. I'll fetch up the police, and we'll break in and see."

As the words left Guest's lips he started, for there was a sudden flash ; then, for a moment, his eyes were dazzled ; the next he was in profound darkness.

Stratton's fingers, unseen by his friend, had closed upon and turned the button of the lamp.



## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### A STARTLING SITUATION.

**T**HREE steps back were sufficient—three steps taken suddenly in that profound darkness were enough, in the excitement of the moment, to make Guest completely lose what a nautical man would call “his bearings” ; and, startled, as well as puzzled, he waited, in utter ignorance of his position in the room, for what was to come next.

Time and again he had been uneasy, even startled, by his friend's actions, feeling that there was a certain amount of mental aberration. He had felt, too, that it was quite possible that in some sudden paroxysm, when galled by his dictation, Stratton might strike at him, but until now he had never known absolute fear.

For, manly and reckless as he was as a rule, he could not conceal from himself that Stratton was, after all, dangerous. That turning out of the light had been intentional ; there must have been an object in view, and, in his tremor of nerve, Guest could think of no other aim than that of making a sudden attack upon one who had become irksome to him.

They were quite alone in that solitary place. If he called for help, no one would hear, and he might be struck down and killed. Stratton, in his madness, might find some means of hiding his body, and—what then ? Edie—poor little Edie, with her bright ways and merry, teasing smiles ? He would never see her again ; and she, too, poor little one, would be heart-broken, till some luckier fellow came along to make her happy.

“No, I'll be hanged if he shall,” thought Guest, as a



culmination to the rapid rush of thought that flashed through his brain. "Poor old Stratton is really as mad as a hatter ; but, even if he has such thoughts, I've as good a chance as he has in the dark, and I'll die hard. Bah ! who's going to die ? Where's the window, or the door ? Here, this is a nice game, Mal," he said aloud, quite firmly. "Where are your matches ?"

But, as he spoke, he made a couple of rapid steps silently, to his right, with outstretched hands, so as to conceal his position from Stratton in the event of the latter meditating an attack—an event which Guest would not now allow.

There was no reply, and Guest stood listening for a few moments before speaking again.

"Do you hear ?" he said. "You shouldn't have been in such a hurry. Open the door, or I shall be upsetting some of your treasures."

Half angry with himself for his cowardice, as he called it, he repeated his monologue and listened ; but he could only hear the throbbings of his own heart.

"Well, of all the ways of getting rid of an unwelcome guest—no joke meant, old man—this is about the shadiest. Here," he cried, more excitedly now, in spite of his efforts to be calm, "why don't you speak ?"

He did not step aside now, but stood firm, with his fists clenched, ready to strike out with all his might in case of attack, though even then he was fighting hard to force down the rising dread, and declaring to himself that he was a mere child to be frightened at being in the dark.

But he knew that he had good cause. Utter darkness is a horror of itself when the confusion of being helpless and in total ignorance of one's position is superadded. Nature plays strange pranks then with one's mental faculties, even as she does with a traveler in some dense fog, or the unfortunate who finds himself "bushed," or lost in the primeval forest, far from help and with the balance of his



mind upset. He learns at such a time that his boasted strength of nerve is very small indeed, and that the bravest and strongest man may succumb to a dread that makes him as timid as a child.

Small as was the space in which he stood, and easy as it would have been, after a little calm reflection, to find door or window, Guest felt that he was rapidly losing his balance; for he dare not stir, face to face as he was with the dread that Stratton really was mad, and that in his cunning he had seized this opportunity for ridding himself of one who must seem to him like a keeper always on the watch to thwart him.

He remained there silent, the cold sweat breaking out all over his face, and his hearing strained to catch the sound of the slightest movement, or even the heavy breathing of the man waiting for an opportunity to strike him down.

For it was in vain to try and combat this feeling. He could find no other explanation in his confused mental state. That must be Stratton's intention, and the only thing to do was to be on the alert and master him when the time for the great struggle came.

There were moments, as Guest stood there breathing as softly as he could, when he felt that this horrible suspense must have been going on for hours; and, as he looked round, the blackness seemed to be full of strange, gliding points of light, which he was ready to think must be Stratton's eyes, till common sense told him that it was all fancy. Then, too, he felt certain that he could hear rapid movements and his enemy approaching him, but the sounds were made by his own pulses; otherwise all was still as death. And at the mental suggestion of death his horror grew more terrible than he could bear. He grew faint and giddy, and made a snatch in the air as if to save himself.

The sensation passed off as quickly as it came, but in those brief moments Guest felt how narrow was the division



between sanity and its reverse, and in a dread greater now than that of an attack by Stratton, he set his teeth, drew himself up, and forcing himself to grasp the fact that all this was only the result of a minute or two in the darkness, he craned forward his neck in the direction of where he believed Stratton to be, and listened.

Not a breath ; not a sound.

There was a clock on the mantelpiece, and he tried to hear its calm, gentle tick, but gave that up on the instant, feeling sure that it must have been neglected and left unwound, and nerving himself now, he spoke out sharply :

“Look here, Mal, old fellow, don’t play the fool. Either open the door, or strike a light, before I smash something valuable.”

There was no reply, but the effort he had made over himself had somewhat restored his balance, and he felt ready to laugh at his childish fears.

“Has he gone, and left me locked in ?” he thought, after striving in vain to hear a sound.

Improbable ; for he had not heard the door open or close, and he would have seen the dim light from the staircase.

No, not if Stratton had softly passed through the inner door and closed it after him before opening the outer.

“Here, I must act,” he said to himself, mentally strung once more. “He couldn’t have played me such a fool’s prank as that. Now, where am I ? The writing table should be straight out there.”

He stretched forth his hand cautiously, and touched something which moved. It was a picture in the middle of a panel, hanging by a fine wire from the rod, and Guest faced round sharply with a touch of his old dread, for he knew now that he had been for long enough standing in a position that would give his enemy—if



enemy Stratton was—an opportunity for striking him down from behind.

With the idea growing upon him that his alarm had all been vain, and that Stratton must have gone straight out the moment he had turned down the lamp—either in his absent state forgetting his presence, or imagining that he had gone on out—Guest felt now a strange kind of irritability against himself, and, with the dread completely gone, he began to move cautiously, and pausing step by step, till his outstretched hands came in contact with a bronze ornament, which fell into the fender with a loud clang.

Guest started round once more, knowing exactly where he stood, and facing Stratton, who seemed to have sprung out of his seat.

“Who’s there?” he cried fiercely.

“Who’s there?” retorted Guest. “Why, what’s come to you, man? Where are your lights? Bah!” he added to himself, “have I lost my head, too?”

As he spoke he drew a little silver case from his vest pocket, and struck a wax match, whose bright light showed his friend sunk back in the chair by the writing table, gazing wildly in his face.

A glance showed Guest a candle in a little holder on the mantelpiece, and applying the match, in another moment the black horror had given place to his friend’s room, with Stratton looking utterly prostrate, and unworthy of a moment’s dread.

Guest’s words partook of his feeling of annoyance with himself at having given his imagination so much play.

“Here, what’s come to you, man?” he cried, seizing Stratton roughly by the shoulder.

“Come to me? I—I—don’t know.”

“Have you been sitting there ever since you put out the light?”



"Yes—I think so."

"But you heard me speak to you?"

"No; I think not. What did you say?"

"He's trembling like a leaf," thought Guest. "Worse than I was."

Then aloud:

"I say, you had better have a glass of grog, and then go to bed. I'll stop with you if you like."

"Here? No, no; come along. It must be getting late."

He made for the door and opened it, signed to Guest to come, and stood waiting.

"All right; but don't leave that candle burning, man. You seem determined to burn down this place."

Stratton uttered a curious little laugh, and hastily crossed the room to the mantelpiece, while Guest stood holding the door open, so as to admit a little light.

The next minute they were on the landing, and Stratton, with trembling fingers, carefully locked the door.

"Now," said Guest, "about poor old Brettison? What do you say? Shall we give notice to the police?"

"No, no," cried Stratton angrily. "It is absurd! He will come back some day. See me home, please, old fellow. My head—all confused and strange. I want to get back as soon as I can."

Guest took his arm to the entrance of the inn, called a cab, and did not leave him till he was safe in his rooms at Sarum Street, after which the young barrister returned to his own chambers to think over the events of the evening in company with a pipe.

"Takes all the conceit out of a fellow," he mused, "to find what a lot of his old childish dread remains when he has grown up. Why, I felt then—— Ugh! I'm ashamed to think of it all. Poor old Stratton! he doesn't know



what he's about half his time. I believe he has got what the doctors call softening of the brain. Strikes me, after to-night's work," he added thoughtfully, "that I must have got it, too."

He refilled his pipe and went on thinking.

"How he started, and how strange he seemed when I talked about the possibility of the poor old fellow lying there dead. Only a fancy of mine. How does the old saying go : 'Fancy goes a great way' ? There, I've had enough fancy for one night."



## CHAPTER XXXV.

### A MODERN INQUISITION.

THE next day was a busy one for Guest. He had to attend court, and in the afternoon he stole a visit to Miss Jerrold, where, by "the merest chance," he found Edie, who was also there by "the merest chance," but they had a long chat about their invalids, as they termed them, and then Guest spoke of his ideas respecting Brettison.

"And you sit here talking to me?" she said. "Why, you ought to be having the place searched."

"You think so, too?"

"Of course, and without loss of time. Why, Percy, he may have known all about Malcolm Stratton's trouble, and now the chance has gone forever."

"Steady, steady!" said Guest, smiling at the girl's impetuosity. "Don't let your imagination run away with you. It's rather bad sometimes."

He left almost directly, and was half disposed to go straight to the police station nearest the inn; but it occurred to him that he had stirred Stratton a good deal on the previous night, and that if he could get his friend's interest full upon this matter it would be a good thing.

"I dare say it will all turn out to be nothing—mere imagination," he thought; "but, even if it is, it may do something to get the poor fellow out of this morbid state. After all, Brettison may be there."

But Guest felt so little upon the matter that he did not hurry to his friend's rooms till after dinner, and, to his surprise, found that he was either not in or obstinately deter-



mined not to be interrupted, for there was no reply to his knocking.

"I'll get him to let me have a latchkey," he thought, "for he is not fit to be left alone."

On the chance of Stratton being there he went on to Benchers' Inn, and, to his surprise and satisfaction, he saw a light in the room.

After a few minutes his knock was responded to, and he was admitted.

"You have come again, then," said Stratton reproachfully.

"Of course," replied Guest, and he snatched at the idea again about Brettison. "Look here," he said, "I have made up my mind that the proper thing to do is to have that room entered. Brettison has been away months, and it ought to be done."

"But you have no authority," said Stratton uneasily.

"You have, as his nearest friend and neighbor."

"No, no, no," said Stratton uneasily.

"I tell you it's right," said Guest. "We'll go to the station quietly, give notice, and a couple of men will come, and bring a locksmith or carpenter to open the door."

"Impossible ! The publicity : it would be horrible."

"If we found the old fellow lying dead there, yes. But he may not be."

"No, he may not be, so it cannot be done," said Stratton with an unwonted animation which made Guest the more eager.

"But it can."

"I say no," said Stratton angrily.

"But I say yes."

"You have no right, no business whatever, to interfere in the matter. I will not have Mr. Brettison's place broken open and his things disturbed. It shall not be done."



"Bravo," thought Guest; "a little more argument of this sort would bring him round." And full of determination, right or wrong, to persevere he said distinctly:

"Look here, Stratton, have you any special reason for refusing to listen to my words?"

"I—I—a reason?" cried Stratton looking startled. "None whatever."

"Oh! You seemed so stubborn."

"The natural feeling of a scientific man against intruders meddling with his study."

"Mr. Brettison made no objection to your breaking in upon him when he was dangerously ill and would have died without your help."

Stratton was silenced for the moment, but he broke out directly with:

"But I am sure he has not been back."

"How can you be, away as you have been so long?"

"I should have heard him or seen him. He would have come in to me."

"Look here, Stratton," said Guest at last, "if you oppose my wishes so strongly, I shall think that you have some special reason for it."

Stratton's eyes contracted a little as he looked fixedly at his friend.

"I shall not oppose you, then," he said, after moistening his lips, as if speaking was an effort. "Have the place examined."

"I will," cried Guest eagerly. "Come on with me to the police station, and let's give information."

Stratton shrank back in his seat.

"No, no. Speak to the people at the lodge; the man can open the door."

"No; I am not going to have the matter spread abroad. And I do not accept the responsibility. No hesitation now; come on."



Stratton was so weakened by ill health and nervous shock that, in spite of himself, he felt compelled to yield, and ten minutes later they were in the cold, formal station, where he felt as if in a dream, held there against his will, and listening while Guest told the inspector on duty his suspicions as if they were those of his neighbor Stratton, who, of course, was not sure, only uneasy, and desirous of quietly learning whether, by any possibility, there was something wrong.

"We'll soon see to that, sir," said the inspector quietly, and sending a message by a constable, a sergeant was called into the office, the matter explained to him, and, after a sharp glance at the two strangers, he proposed to call and get Johnson to come with them, as he would be home from work and they could pick him up on the way.

The inspector expressed his approval, and then said :

"I hope, gentlemen, you will find it is all a mistake, for your friend's sake. Good-evening."

As soon as they were outside the sergeant turned to them.

"As you want to make no fuss, gentlemen, and would like the matter kept quiet, suppose you both go on? I'll join you in ten minutes with my man. People may notice it, if we all go together."

Guest nodded, and they separated. Then a cab was called, and Stratton's chambers once more reached.

Here the latter grew strangely excited, and began to protest against the proceedings.

"Look here," said Guest warmly, "if I had had any doubt about its being right, I should go on now."

"Why?" cried Stratton wonderingly.

"Because the excitement of another's trouble or suffering is rousing you up, old fellow, and making you seem something like what you were of old."

Stratton caught him by the arm, and was about to insist upon the plan being given up, when there was a sharp rap at the door, and Guest caught up candle and matches and



led the way out on to the landing, followed by Stratton, who looked as if he were in a dream.

The sergeant was outside with a man of the regular carpenter class, with a bag swung over his shoulder by a hammer passed through the handles.

"Here we are, gentlemen," said the police officer. "Candle? Shan't want it, sir; I have a lantern, and it will be handier. You wish it all to be done quietly, you say, but I'm afraid our friend here will make a little noise with his tools. People downstairs will hear."

"They are only offices below," said Guest.

"Upstairs, then?"

"No one there in the evening."

"That's right then, sir. Which is the door?"

At a word from Guest, Stratton moved across the landing and turned down the passage in which Brettison's doorway stood, moving still in the same dreamy fashion, as his friend's will forced him to act, and as they reached the doorway the sergeant turned on his lantern, so that the light played about the keyhole.

"Now, Jem," he said, "have a look at it. What do you say?"

The man slouched up, and the shadow of his head, with its closely fitting cap, glided about on the door, as he turned from side to side to get a good look at the little opening.

"Light more this way, matey," he growled, in an ill-used tone. "That'll do. Steady, please. I don't want to look at the 'inges."

"There you are, then. Well, is it a pick? or a sawout?"

"Pick," said the man, swinging his bag down on to the floor and opening it by drawing out the hammer.

There was a faint jingle as the bag was opened, and its owner looked up in a protesting way.

"Can't work if you make a Jacky Lantern game of it, matey. I want to see."



The light of the lantern was directed into the bag, revealing a stock, a box of center bits, a keyhole saw, and a couple of bunches of attenuated keys, some of which were merely a steel wire turned at right angles at the end.

"Nice, respectable looking character this, gentlemen," said the sergeant dryly. "Supposed to be an honest man ; but if a 'tec.' got hold of him with a bag like that he'd have to say a great deal before anyone would believe him. That one do, my lad?"

"No, too big," said the workman huskily, and he began to whistle softly as he coolly selected another hooklike skeleton key from his bunch ; while Guest stood watching the pair with a strange feeling of nervousness increasing upon him, caused partly by the weird aspect of the scene, with all in darkness save the round patch of light on the old drab-painted oaken door, in which glow the fingers of the workman were busily engaged, as if they were part of some goblin performance, and were quite distinct from any body to which they should have belonged.

He began wondering, too, whether there really was any cause for their operations—whether poor old Brettison really did lie dead in the dusty room beyond the double doors which held them at bay—dust to dust, the mortal frame of the gentle old naturalist slowly decaying into the atoms by which he was surrounded ; and whether it was not something like sacrilege to interfere with so peaceful a repose.

And all the time the little steel pick was probing about among the wards of the lock with a curious clicking sound, above which Guest could hear the intermittent, harsh breathing of his friend, who watched the illuminated door with a stern, fixed gaze.

The second pick was after a time withdrawn.

"No good?" said the sergeant.

"Not a bit," growled the man, and he held his bunch of keys up to the glass of the bull's-eye lantern.



"Don't worry, old chap," said the sergeant. Then, turning to Guest :

"Look a nice, respectable lot, we do, sir," he said. "If one of your neighbors was to see us he'd be slipping off to fetch all the police he could find, to see what we were about."

"Wish you'd hold that there light still," growled his follower. "Who's to find a pick with your bobbing it about like that?"

"All right. Don't get shirty, my lad ;" and then, as a fresh pick was selected, and the man began operating again, the sergeant placed his hand beside his mouth, after directing the light full on the keyhole, and whispered to Guest :

"I'm afraid you're right, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"What you thought, sir. There's somebody lying in there, sure as sure, or my mate here wouldn't turn like he has."

"Oh, nonsense !" whispered Guest uneasily.

"No, sir ; it's right enough. He's like a good dog ; has a kind of feeling when there's something wrong."

"There you go again," growled the operator. "Keyhole aint on the ceiling, mate, nor yet on the floor."

"Oh, all right."

"But it aint all right. I've got only two hands, or I'd hold the blessed bulls-eye myself."

"There you are, then ; will that do?"

"Do? Why, of course it will," growled the fellow. "I don't ask much. If you can't hold a lantern, let one of the gentlemen."

"Something's rusty," said the sergeant.

"No, it aint that," said the man, taking the remark literally. "Look's 'ily enough, but it's such a rum un—sort of a double trouble back-fall. I don't know what



people are about, inventing such stupid locks. 'Patent,' they calls 'em, and what for? Only to give a man more trouble. All locks can be opened, if you give your mind to it, whether you've got a key or no. It's only a case of patience. That's got him!" he said exultantly, and a thrill ran through Guest. "No, it aint; that blessed tumbler's gone down again. But, as I was a-saying," he continued, as he resumed his operations, "a man who knows his business can open a lock sooner or later, so why aint they all made simple and ha' done with it?"

"If talking would pick a lock," said the sergeant jocularly, "that one would have flown open by now."

"And if chucking the light of a bull's-eye everywhere but how a man wants it would ha' done it, we should ha' been inside ten minutes ago. Like to have a try yourself, pardner?"

"No, no; go on," said the sergeant sternly; and the man sighed and selected a fresh pick, one so slight and small that it seemed to be too fragile for the purpose, as it flashed in the light while being inserted.

Then ensued a few minutes of clicking and scratching before there came a faint click, and a sigh of satisfaction from the workman.

"There you are!" he said, as he drew the door toward him, the paint cracking where it had stuck, and a faint creak coming from one hinge, while there floated out toward them a puff of dense, thick air, suggestive of an ancient sarcophagus and the dust of ages and decay.

Then there was a sharp, scampering noise, and, as Stratton stood peering forward into the dark room, where a faint halo of light spread like a nimbus about the head of a portrait on the further wall, the workman said, half nervously, half as if to keep up his courage:

"Rats!"



## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### A SEARCH FOR THE HORROR.

THE sound ceased on the instant as its cause passed through some hole in the paneling, and Stratton uttered a low gasping sigh, and caught hold of Guest's arm with a grip which felt as if it was the grasp of a skeleton.

"Are you faint?" whispered the young barrister. "Let me take you back to your room."

"If the gentleman feels queer, sir, he'd better not go on with it," said the sergeant, also in a low voice, as if impressed by the place. "He isn't used to it; we are."

"Yes," said the workman. "Not our first case, eh, pardner?"

But even he spoke below his breath.

"No, I'll stay," said Stratton more firmly. "I have been ill, officer, and it has left me weak."

"Then don't try it, sir. You can leave it to us."

"Go on," said Stratton, after drawing a long, gasping breath; "I am quite right now."

"Spoken like an Englishman, sir," said the sergeant. "Party's likeness, gents?" he said, as the light shone full on the oil-painting across the room; the face of the gray, benevolent-looking man seeming to gaze at them reproachfully.

"Yes, my old friend's portrait," said Stratton, with a sigh.

"Better let me go first, sir," said the sergeant, pressing before Stratton, who was about to enter, but he was too late. Stratton took a step forward, caught his foot against something, and nearly fell headlong into the room.

"Mind my tools, please," growled the workman, stooping



to pick up his bag, which had lain in the darkness of the opening ; and then all stepped cautiously into the well furnished room, which was, in almost every respect, a repetition of Stratton's, only reversed, and a good deal encumbered with large, open cases full of bulky folios, containing series of pressed and dried plants. These hid a great deal of the paneling and carving, save on the right, where, on either side of the beautiful old fireplace, were two low doors, formerly the entrances to the passages which connected the room with Stratton's when they were part of a suite.

Away to the left was another door, matching those by the fireplace—that leading into the botanist's bed-chamber ; and wherever a space was left on the paneling, there was a portrait, in an old tarnished gilt frame, of some ancestor, each—dimly seen though it was—as the sergeant made the light play round the walls—bearing a striking resemblance to that which faced them.

“ Looks as if he was watching us,” said the workman huskily ; and he placed a piece of tobacco in his mouth, making Guest start as he closed the brass box from which he had extracted it with a loud snap.

“ Yes,” said the sergeant, in a whisper, as if to himself, and he made the light of his bull's-eye play from easy-chair to couch, and then all about the floor ; “ I always wondered how they managed them eyes.”

Everything looked in order, with one exception. The thick Turkey carpet and heavy rug were exactly as they had been laid ; the fireplace showed the coal, wood, and paper neatly laid ; and the chairs were all duly ranged in their places ; but the sergeant's light rested upon the table—a heavy, oblong affair, with four massive carven legs—a part of whose top was bare, for the thick green cloth cover, with bullion braiding at the border, had been half dragged off, and lay in folds from the top to floor, only kept from gliding right off by the heavy lamp, and looking as if it had



been hastily dragged down to cover something by the table, or caught by someone's foot when passing hastily to the door.

The sergeant made his light play on the dark folds for a few moments, and then jerked it away.

"Do you gentlemen mean to stop?" he said, speaking now a little more rapidly.

There was no reply and the man stepped forward to the table, raised one corner of the cloth quickly, and then swung it right up and steadily lowered it again, while Guest uttered a sigh of relief, for there was nothing visible but the heavy legs of the table.

"Enough to deceive any man," said the sergeant, who then stopped and listened, walked back, and softly closed both doors.

"May as well be private, gentleman," he said. "Eh?"

This last to the workman, who had muttered something in a low voice.

"I says I could ha' swore he was there."

"So could I, Jemmy," replied the sergeant, as he made the light play round the room again, and let it rest upon the chamber-door.

"There is nothing, you see," said Stratton, rather quickly.

"Haven't done yet, sir," replied the sergeant. Then, in a low voice to Guest—"I'm pretty well used to this sort o' thing, sir, but 'pon my soul I feel as if I should like to turn that picture round. It's just as if it was watching me. There, let's get it over."

The man had, in spite of his being accustomed to scenes of horror, seemed as if it were necessary to string himself up. He had gone to the table finally to lift the cover, and that had used up a certain amount of nerve force. He was forced to make a call on nature for a further supply.

He strode across to the chamber-door, threw it open, and walked in, the others following and standing just inside, as



he made the light play round a well-furnished bedroom where everything was exactly in its place—the bed made, dressing table in perfect order, and a couple of cupboards displaying nothing within but sundry clothes hanging from pegs.

“Arn’t in here,” said the sergeant, after a final look round. “Been no struggle—no sign of anyone having been took ill. Don’t like one thing, Jem,” he added.

“Well,” said the man, “if you mean, pardner, that everything looks too tidy, and as if things had been straightened up all but the table-kiver, that’s just what I was a-thinking.”

“Right,” said the sergeant; “that was the one thing forgotten or left in the hurry.”

“Oh, no,” said Guest quickly. “I see we have raised a false alarm.”

“May be, sir,” said the sergeant firmly, “but I’m not satisfied yet. Let’s go back in the other room, please. I want to know what that table-cover means. Hallo! What’s this?” he said sharply, as he stooped down and picked up a piece of composition candle, gnawed nearly all away. “Where’s the candlestick?”

“Here,” said Guest, pointing to where a little old-fashioned candlestick lay by a stand containing folios of dried plants.

“Well, sir, that was knocked down,” said the sergeant.

“We are wasting time,” said Stratton firmly. “See if that lock is uninjured, my man, so that the door will close.”

“Stop a bit, sir, please,” said the sergeant; “we haven’t done yet.”

He stepped at once to the paneled door on the left of the fireplace, turned the handle, threw it open, and made his light play in the long, deep, narrow closet, one side of which was filled from floor to ceiling by a rack laden with books of pressed plants.

“Looks as if it had once been a passage,” said the ser-



geant, "oak panels right over the ceiling. Well, nobody there," he continued, as he backed out and closed the door.

"That will do," said Stratton, speaking more firmly now. "My friend, and I made a mistake. We are much obliged for all you have done, and——"

"Not quite done, sir," said the sergeant grimly ; and he crossed to the other side of the fireplace, took hold of the handle of the closed up door, left to make both sides match, and tried to turn it, but it was fast.

Stratton turned ghastly, but he was in the shade.

"No cupboard there," said Guest sharply.

The sergeant turned quickly, and his light flashed across the faces of the two friends. He saw Stratton's wild look, and he tapped on the panel.

"No cupboard, sir ? Sounds hollow, too."

Guest caught sight of his friend's face at the same moment, and his pulses leaped ; a confused mist of memories flooded his brain, and something made him keep silence, though, had he been asked, he could not have explained why.

"I should say there is a cupboard here," continued the sergeant, turning back to examine it. "Fastened up, but been a cupboard like the other, of course."

Guest glanced at Stratton again in the gloom, but he could see nothing now, with the light averted, only hear his heavy breathing, which was faintly stertorous, as if from exertion.

"Let me see, gentlemen, you live in the next chambers ?"

Stratton was silent, while Guest met the officer's eye, and involuntarily answered : "Yes."

"Do they back on to there ?"

"Yes ; part of the old suite," said Guest, answering, as it were, against his will.

"I'll trouble you to take me in there for a moment, please," said the man decisively.

Stratton drew a deep breath, and without a word led the way out into the passage and round to his own door.



## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### RUN TO EARTH.

“**W**HAT the dickens does it all mean?” thought Guest wonderingly, as he followed into Stratton’s chambers, with a strange feeling of expectancy exciting him. Something was going to happen, he felt sure, and that something would be connected with his friend. And now he began to regret bitterly having urged on the quest. It had had the effect of rousing Stratton for the moment, but he looked horrible now, and Guest asked himself again, what did it mean?

The sergeant looked sharply round Stratton’s room, and noted where the chamber lay; but his attention was at once riveted upon the fireplace with its two doors, and he walked to the one on the right, seized the handle, and found it fast.

“Yes,” he said, “been open once, but closed, I should say, for many years.”

“Want it opened, pardner?” said his companion.

“Not that one,” said the sergeant meaningly; and he went to the door on the left, Stratton watching him fixedly the while, and Guest, in turn, watching his friend, with a sense of some great trouble looming over him, as he wondered what was about to happen.

“Hah! yes,” said the sergeant, who began to show no little excitement now; “fellow door sealed up, too.”

Guest started and glanced quickly at his friend, who remained drawn up, silent and stern, as a man would look who was submitting to a scrutiny to which he has objected.

The sergeant shook the door, but it was perfectly fast, and the handle immovable.



"Some time since there was a way through here," he said confidently ; and, as he spoke, Guest again gazed at Stratton, and thought of how short a time it was since he had been in the habit of going to that closet to fetch out soda water, spirits, and cigars.

What did it mean ? What could it mean, and why did not Stratton speak out and say : "The closet belongs to this side of the suite."

But no ; he was silent and rigid, while the sense of a coming calamity loomed broader to mingle with a cloud of regrets.

He was trying to think out some means of retiring from the scrutiny, as the sergeant turned to his companion and said a few words in a low tone—words which Guest felt certain meant orders to force open the closet door, which, for some reason, Stratton had fastened up, when the sergeant spoke out :

"Now, gentlemen, please, we'll go back to the other chambers."

Guest drew a deep breath, full of relief, for the tension was, for the moment, at an end.

He followed with Stratton, whose eyes now met his ; and there was such a look of helplessness and despair in the gaze that Guest caught his friend's arm.

"What is it, old fellow ?" he whispered ; but there was no reply, and, after closing the door, they followed into Brettison's room, where the sergeant stood ready for them with his companion.

As they entered, the man closed the door and said sharply :

"You're right, gentlemen ; there has been foul play."

A cold sweat burst out over Guest's brow, and his hair began to cling to his temples. He once more glanced at Stratton, but he did not move a muscle ; merely stood listening, as if surprised at the man's assertion.



"There have always been two cupboards here, made out of these two old passages, and this one has been lately fastened up."

"No, no," said Stratton, in a low, deep tone.

"What, sir! Look here," cried the man, and he shook one of the great panels low down in the door, and the other higher. "What do you say to that? Both those have been out quite lately."

Stratton bent forward, looking startled, and then stepped close up to the door, to see for himself if the man was correct.

The lower panel was certainly loose, and could be shaken about a quarter of an inch each way, but that seemed to be all; and looking relieved he drew back.

"Nonsense!" he said. "Absurd!"

Guest looked at him sharply, for the voice seemed to be that of a stranger.

"Not very absurd, sir," replied the sergeant. "This door was made two or three hundred years ago, I should say, and the old oak is shrunk and worm-eaten. I could easily shove that panel out, but there's no need. Here, Jem, try and open the lock the regular way."

Stratton's lips parted, but he said no word; and, as the second man strode up to the door with his tools, the sergeant went on:

"I thought it was a mare's nest, sir, and even now I don't like to speak too fast; but it looks to me as if the poor gentleman had been robbed and murdered, and whoever did it has hidden the body in here."

A curious cry escaped from Stratton's lips, and he gazed fiercely at the officer.

"That's it, sir," said the man. "It's a startler for you, I know, living so close, but I'm afraid it's true. Well, Jem, what do you make of it?"

Guest looked as if he had received a mental blow, as idea



after idea flashed through his mind. Stratton's manner suggested it—his acts of late, the disappearance of Brettison on the wedding day, the large sum of money on the table, the mad horror and despair of the man ever since—it must be so ; and he felt that here was the real key to all his friend's strange behavior.

He wiped the cold moisture from his brow, and stared at Stratton, but his friend was standing rigid and determined, watching the actions of the two men, and Guest had hard work to suppress a groan, as he felt that his companion would owe to him the discovery and the punishment that would follow.

Just then Stratton turned and saw that he was being watched ; but, as if all attempts at concealment were hopeless, he smiled faintly at his friend and then turned away.

The workman had not made any reply, and the sergeant spoke again as a large picklock was thrust into the keyhole again and again.

“ Rusted up ? ”

“ Ay, and eaten away ; there hasn't been a key used in that lock in our time, pardner. But stop a minute ; more ways of killing a cat than hanging of her. Let's have a look.”

He began to examine the edge of the door, and then turned sharply round.

“ Look here,” he said ; and then taking hold of the antique door knob, he lifted it and the whole of the front bar or rail came away—a piece of narrow wood six feet long.

“ Split away from the tenons,” he said ; and the sergeant uttered an ejaculation, full of eager satisfaction.

“ There, gentleman,” he said, pointing. “ One—two—three—four bright new screws. What do you say now ? ”

There they were plain enough, close to the door frame, and Guest uttered a low sigh as he supported himself by the back of a chair.



"Out with 'em, Jem," cried the sergeant excitedly, and, a large screw-driver being produced from the tool bag, the screws were attacked, and turned easily, the man rapidly withdrawing them and laying them one by one on the mantel shelf.

"They haven't been in very long," he muttered, raising one to his nose. "Been rubbed in paraffin candle, I should say."

He began turning another, while the sergeant gave Guest the lantern to hold while he went and picked up the piece of candle they had found at first.

"Not all teeth marks, gentlemen," he said ; "the candle was used to ease those screws."

There was a pause then, for the man was at work on the last screw, and as he turned, Guest arrived at the course he should pursue. Stratton was ignoring the fact that the closet belonged to his room ; he must, for his own sake, do the same. He could not give evidence against his friend ; for there it was plain enough now, and if Stratton had been guilty of Brettison's death, he was being bitterly punished for his crime.

The last screw fell on the floor, and was picked up and placed with the others. Then the man stood with his screw-driver in his hand.

"Prize it open?" he said. The sergeant nodded, and on forcing the edge of the screw-driver in the crack between the inner half of the bar and the jamb, it acted as a lever, and the door gave with a faint creak, but as soon as it was a couple of inches open the man drew back.

"Your job now," he said.

The sergeant stepped forward ; Stratton stood firm, as if carved in stone, and Guest closed his eyes, feeling sick, and as if the room was turning round, till a sharp ejaculation made him open his eyes again to see that the sergeant had entered with his lantern, and was mak-



ing it play over the panels of the inner side of the farther door.

"That's the old door leading into the place, I suppose, sir?" he said.

"Yes."

Guest started again, the voice sounded so strange, but he was gaining courage, for there was the familiar dark bathroom, viewed from the other end, with the cigar box on the shelf close to the door in company with the spirit stand. Beneath the shelf there were three large four-gallon tins, which were unfamiliar, and suggested petroleum or crystal oil; there was a mackintosh hung on a peg, looking very suggestive; an alpenstock in a corner, with a salmon and trout rod. Guest saw all this at a glance, and his spirits rose, for there was no ghastly scene upon which to gaze.

Then his spirits sank to zero again, for there was the oblong of the inclosed bath occupying the left of the long, narrow place, and only just leaving room for anyone to pass.

He shuddered, and at that moment the sergeant took hold of the edge of the mahogany lid to raise it, but without success.

"Fast," muttered the latter; and he held the light to the glistening French-polished mahogany cover, looking from place to place. "Here you are, Jem," he said, in a low tone; "four more screws, and only just put in."

The other man uttered a low growl, and entered with his screw-driver; moistened his hands and the tool creaked on the top of a screw, and then entered the cross slit with a loud snap. The next minute the first screw was being withdrawn.

"Pretty badly put in," said the man. "Didn't have a carpenter here."

He worked away, making the old place vibrate a little



with his efforts, and to Guest the whole business was horribly suggestive of taking off the lid from a coffin ; but he was firmer now, as he stood behind Stratton, who drew a deep breath, now and then like a heavy sigh, but neither stirred from his position by the door they had entered, nor spoke.

All at once there was a sharp rap on the lid of the bath, which acted like a sounding-board, and the man at work started back in alarm.

“ All right, Jem,” said the sergeant ; “ you jarred it down from the shelf.”

As he spoke he snatched up what he evidently looked upon as evidence ; for it was a large gimlet, evidently quite new, and its long spiral glistened in the light of the lantern.

“ Thought somebody throwed it,” growled the man, as he resumed his task of withdrawing the screws till the last was out, and placed close to the bath, on the floor.

“ Sure that’s all ? ” said the sergeant.

The man ran his finger along the edge of the bath lid, uttered a grunt, and drew back toward the door by which he had entered.

“ Lift up the lid, man—lift up the lid,” said the sergeant, directing the lantern so that the grain of the new-looking wood glistened and seemed full of golden and ruddy brown depths of shadow, among which the light seemed to play.

“ Do you hear ? ” he said. “ Lift up the lid.”

The man made no answer, but ran his hand over his moist forehead, and still backed toward the door, where Stratton and Guest were standing. Then, as they drew aside to let him pass :

“ Precious hot in there,” he growled.

“ Look here, Jem,” said the sergeant ; “ don’t leave a fellow in the lurch. Come on.”

Thus adjured, the man turned back and held out his hand



"It aint my work," he said in a hoarse whisper ; "I've done my bit. But I'll hold the light for you, if you like."

The sergeant passed the lantern to his companion, who took it, and so reversed its position, the rays from the bull's-eye being directed toward the sergeant, and, consequently, Stratton and Guest were in the shadow, out of which the latter peered forward with his heart beating violently, and as he leaned forward he touched Stratton's arm.

He shuddered and shrank back, being conscious that Stratton grasped the reason, for a low sigh escaped him ; but he did not stir, and, in spite of his feeling of repulsion, Guest felt compelled to press forward again to witness the horror about to be unveiled.

"Turn the light more down," whispered the sergeant ; and, in spite of the low tone in which they were uttered, the words sounded loudly in Guest's ears.

"Now for it," muttered the officer ; and, as if forcing himself to act, he flung up the bath lid so that it struck against the paneled side of the place with a sharp rap, and set free a quantity of loose plaster and brickwork to fall behind the wainscot with a peculiar, rustling sound that sent a shudder through the lookers on.



## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### THE BLIND LEAD.

AS that horrible, rustling sound behind the wainscot was heard, the two hardened men in the old passage shrank away to door and end, while a cold sweat bedewed Guest's face, and his breath felt labored. Then there was a reaction. Old memories flashed through his brain, and he seized Stratton's arm.

"Old friends," he muttered. "I can't forsake him now."

The arm he gripped felt rigid and cold, but Stratton made no movement, no sign, and at that moment they saw the sergeant flash the light down into the sarcophagus-like receptacle; for, thanks to the manufacturers, our baths are made as suggestive of a man's last resting-place as they can be designed.

There was utter silence then for a moment. Then the sergeant uttered a low whistle and exclaimed:

"Well, I *am* blessed!"

"Aint he there?" said the workman, from the door.

"Come and look, Jem."

Jem went in slowly, looked down in the bath, which was lit up by the rays from the lantern, and then uttered a low, chuckling sound, while Guest tried to make out the meaning of the strange expression, dimly seen, on his friend's face.

For Stratton's eyes showed white circles about the irises, as he now leaned forward to gaze into the bath.

Guest was the last to look into the white enameled vessel, one-third full of what seemed to be water, but from the



peculiar odor which rose from the surface, evidently was not.

Stratton was silent ; and in the strange exultation he felt on seeing that all the horrors he had imagined were vain and empty, Guest shouted :

“Bah ! What cock-and-bull stories you policemen hatch !”

The sergeant, who had been regularly taken aback, recovered himself at this.

“Come, sir,” he cried ; “I like that. You come to us and say your friend’s missing, and you think that he is lying dead in his chambers. ‘All right,’ we say——”

“Wrong,” cried Guest with a laugh, which sounded strange and forced.

“So it is, sir—wrong,” said the sergeant. “We come and do our duty, and I follow up the scent as clear as clear, right up to this spot ; and I put it to you gents, as gentlemen, oughtn’t your friend to have been murdered and a-lying there ?”

“Well,” said Guest, with another forced laugh, as he glanced uneasily at Stratton ; “it did look suspicious, and you worked it all up so theatrically that I was a little impressed.”

“Theatrical ! Impressed, sir ! Why, it was all as real to me ; and I say again your friend ought to be lying there. What do you say, Jem ?”

“Cert’nly.”

“But he is not,” said Guest sharply ; “and it has all been a false alarm, you see, and I’m very, very glad.”

“Course you are, sir, and so are we,” said Jem huskily. “Don’t ’pologize. Don’t make a bit o’ diffrens to us. We’re paid all the same.”

“Of course,” cried Guest, keeping up the position of leader, for Stratton stood gazing down into the bath like one in a dream. “There, sergeant, we are very much obliged,



and it's all right ; so your man had better screw down the bath lid again."

"But it isn't all right, sir," said the sergeant testily, and he gave his ear a scratch. "I don't like giving up just for a check."

Guest shivered.

"I've got as far as here, and I put it to you ; the gentleman ought to have been in that thing, and he isn't."

"That's plain enough," said Guest hurriedly.

"Then where is he?"

"In the country, I suppose, collecting."

"That's your opinion, sir. P'r'aps your friend'll speak. What do you say, sir?"

"Nothing," said Stratton, with an effort.

"There is nothing to say," said Guest sharply.

"Queer for this place to have all been screwed up—both the door and the bath."

"Oh, no ; I see why," said Guest quickly. "Bad smells, perhaps, from the waste pipe—sewer gas."

"Don't smell like bad gas," said Jem, sniffing about and ending by dipping a finger in the bath, and holding it to his nose, after which he gave a peculiar grunt.

"Well?"

"Sperrits."

"Nonsense, man!" cried Guest. "What! That?"

"That's sperrits, sure enough, sir," said the man, dipping his finger in the bath again. "Open that there lantern, pardner."

The sergeant obeyed, and his companion thrust in his finger, for it to be enveloped directly with a bluish flame.

"Mind what you're doing," said the sergeant hastily, "or we shall have the whole place a-fire."

"All right, pardner. Sperrits it is, and, I should say, come in them cans."



He gave one of the great tins a tap with his toe, and it sent forth a dull, metallic sound.

"Very likely," said Guest. "Our friend is a naturalist, and uses spirits to preserve things in."

"Look ye here," said the workman oracularly, and he worked one hand about as he spoke. "I don't purfess to know no more than what's my trade, which is locks and odd jobs o' that sort. My pardner here'll tell you, gents, that I'll face anything from a tup'ny padlock up to a strong room or a patent safe; but I've got a thought here as may be a bright 'un, or only a bit of a man's nat'ral fog. You want to find this gent, don't you?"

"Yes," said Guest; and the tone of that "yes" suggested plainly enough, "no."

"What have you got in that wooden head of yours now, Jem?" growled the sergeant.

"Wait a minute, my lad, and you'll hear."

"There's no occasion for us to stop here," said Guest hurriedly.

"On'y a minute, sir, and then I'll screw down the lid. What I wanted to say, gents, is; haven't we found the party, after all?"

"What!" cried Guest. "Where?"

"Here, sir. I don't understand sperrits—beer's my line; but what I say is: mayn't the gent be in there, after all, in slooshun—melted away in the sperrits, like a lump o' sugar in a man's tea?"

"No, he mayn't," said the sergeant, closing the lid with a bang. "Don't you take no notice of him, gentlemen; he's handled screws till he's a reg'lar screw himself."

"But what I say is——"

"Hold your row, and don't make a fool of yourself, mate. Get your work done, and then go home and try experiments with a pint o' paraffin and a rat."

The man uttered a growl, and attacked the bath lid



angrily, screwing it down as the light was held for him, and then going with the others into the sitting room, where he soon restored the old door to its former state, there being no sign, when he had finished, of its having been touched.

Then, after a glance round, with Brettison's portrait still seeming to watch them intently, the outer door was closed, and the little party returned to Stratton's chambers, where certain coins were passed from hand to hand, evidently to the great satisfaction of the two men, for Jem began to chuckle and shake his head.

"Well," said the sergeant; "what now?"

"I was thinking, pardner, about baths."

"Yes, yes," said Guest hurriedly; "but that will do."

"Yes, sir, I'm going; but there's your gents as goes and breaks the ice in the Serpentine, and them as goes to be cooked in a hoven, and shampooed; and you pull your strings and has it in showers, and your hot waters and cold waters; but this gent seems to have liked his stronger than anyone I ever knowed afore. I say, pardner, that's having your lotion, and no sham."

"Pooh!" said the sergeant.

"Look here," said Guest quickly, and he slipped another sovereign into the sergeant's hand, "this has all been a foolish mistake. I was too hasty."

"Only did your duty, sir," replied the man. "It was quite right, and I'm glad, for all concerned, that it was a mistake."

"You understand, then; we don't want it to be talked about in the inn, or—or—anywhere, in fact."

"Don't you be afraid about that, sir," said the man quietly. "I don't wonder at you. It did look suspicious, but that's all right, sir. Good-night, gentlemen both."

"But your man?"

"Close as a nut, sir; aren't you, Jem?"



"Rather," said that personage, with a growl. "Night, sir."

He stepped out, and the sergeant followed. As Guest was closing the door upon him, he whispered :

"Quite upset your friend, sir. Why, he turned ghastly ; couldn't have looked worse if we'd found the——"

"Exactly. Bad health," said Guest hurriedly. "Good-night."

And he closed both doors ; and then, with a peculiar sensation of shrinking, turned to face Stratton where he stood by the fireplace.



## CHAPTER XXXIX,

### GUEST'S SUGGESTION.

STRATTON did not move, but stood as if lost in thought, while involuntarily Guest's eyes were directed toward the door on his left.

A key had always been visible, in old times, by the handle—a key about which Guest had bantered his friend and cut jokes in which the spirit-stand and Mrs. Brade's name were brought into contact. But there was no key there now, and he recalled how Stratton had endeavored to keep him away from that door. A trifle then, but looking singularly suggestive now.

A dozen little facts began to grow and spread into horrors, all pointing to the cause of Stratton's sudden change, and strengthening Guest's ideas that there must have been a quarrel on the morning appointed for the wedding, possibly connected with money matters, and then in a fit of rage and excitement—disappointment, perhaps, at not willingly receiving the help he had anticipated—a blow had been struck, one that unintentionally had proved fatal.

All Guest's ideas set in this direction, and once started everything fitted in exactly, so that at last he felt perfectly convinced that his friend had killed Brettison and in some way disposed of the body.

For a moment he was disposed to cast the ideas out as utterly absurd and improbable, but the ideas would flow back again ; and, try how he would to find some better solution of the puzzle, there seemed to be only that one way.

Stratton stood there by the fireplace, pale, haggard, and



wrapped in thought, apparently utterly unconscious of his friend's presence, till Guest took a step or two forward and rested his hand upon the table.

Here he remained for a few minutes, trying to think out his course. For he felt now full of a guilty knowledge, and in that knowledge, if he did not make it known, a sharer—an accomplice—in a murder. For so the law and the world would judge it. And then there was Edie !

A shiver of dread and misery ran through him as her bright little face crossed his mind, and he saw that by keeping silence till the discovery—for that must come—he would be so implicated that he would share his friend's arrest ; and, even if matters did not turn out serious with him as far as the law was concerned, his position with the admiral's family would be the same as Stratton's—everything would be at an end—his love affair like that of the miserable man before him ; the man who now turned to him with a scared, horrified, hunted look in his eyes, startled by Guest's advance.

It was time to speak, Guest thought, but the words would not come at first, and he could only gaze wildly at the wretched being before him, and think of their old school-days together, then of their first fresh manhood, and always together, sharing purses, pleasures, troubles, full confidence always till this trouble had come.

For the moment he hated and loathed the man before him ; but the feeling was momentary. Stratton would not willfully have thrust himself into such a position. He felt that there must be something more than he knew, and, softening down, he said huskily :

“ Well, Stratton, what have you to say ? ”

There was no answer. Stratton gazed at him with a far-off, fixed stare, full of helpless misery, which drew his friend far nearer in heart, and he spoke more freely now.



"Come," he said; "speak out. In spite of everything, I am your old friend. I want to help you. Will you trust me?"

"Trust you? Yes," said Stratton slowly.

"Tell me, then, everything, beginning from the morning when you were to be married."

Stratton slowly shook his head.

"Come, man; this is no time for reticence. Tell me all," cried Guest excitedly; and he spoke in a hoarse whisper, and glanced to door and window, as if afraid of being overheard.

There was the same desponding movement.

"Am I not worthy of your confidence? I tell you I am ready to share it—ready to help you if you will only be honest with me, and tell me frankly everything."

There was no reply.

"Stratton, old fellow," cried Guest piteously, "you must speak. I do not believe that you could have been intentionally guilty."

Stratton glanced at him quickly, but the eager look died out.

"I tell you that you are injuring me as well as yourself. You have blighted your life; for God's sake don't blight mine, too."

"What—what do you mean?" cried Stratton, who started as if stung at his friend's reference to his future, and when the appeal came, took a step or two forward.

"That, knowing what I do, compelled from our old associations to be silent, I cannot—dare not go near her again."

"Guest!"

"I have said it. How can I take her innocent hand?"

"Because you know nothing," cried Stratton excitedly; "because you shall know nothing. One is enough to bear a crime, if crime it was."



"Ah! You confess!" cried Guest; "then you did—kill him?"

Stratton made no reply, but looked firmly and sorrowfully in his eyes.

"I knew it—I was sure—your manner betrayed you when we were in that room. I see all, now. You closed that door."

"I will not be dragged into any confession," said Stratton fiercely. "It is my secret, and I will tell it to none. I have a right to keep my own counsel. You have a right to denounce me if you like. If you speak, you can force me to no greater punishment than I suffer now."

"Then it is all true?" groaned Guest. "You killed him, and hid him there?"

Stratton uttered a mocking laugh.

"That door!" said Guest huskily. "Twice over you have stopped me from going there. Your manner has been that of a guilty man, and I am forced to share the knowledge of your crime."

"No," said Stratton, speaking now with a look of calm contempt; "you share no knowledge—you shall share no knowledge. You say I killed him and hid him there; where are your proofs? You have brought in the police, and they have searched. What have you found? Again, I say, where are your proofs?"

Guest looked at him wildly, and his lips parted, but he uttered no sound.

"Let me rest, my good fellow, let me rest. You are warring against your own happiness in trying to pry into matters that are naught to you. I will not blight your future, Percy Guest, by letting you share any secrets of mine. There, good-night. I want to be alone."

Guest tried to recommence the argument, and to master the man who looked so pitifully weak, but somehow the other's will was too powerful, and he had to yield, leaving



the chambers at last with a shudder of horror, and feeling that he could never take Stratton by the hand again.

For the man seemed changed. There was a mocking, almost triumphant, look in his eyes as he took the lamp from the table, and followed Guest out on to the landing to stand there, holding the light over the massive balustrade for his friend to descend.

As Guest reached the bottom, he looked up, and there, by the light which fell full upon Stratton's face, was the strange, mocking air intensified, and with a shiver he hurried across the inn, feeling that the mystery had deepened instead of being cleared.

His intention was to hurry back to his own chambers, feeling that it was impossible for him to go near Bourne Square, knowing what he did, but the yearning for one to share his knowledge proved too strong.

"And I promised that she should share every secret," he said to himself. "Whom am I to trust if I don't trust her!"

The result was that, with his brain in a whirl of excitement, and hardly knowing what he did, he leaped into the first cab, and urged the man to drive fast, while he sank back into the corner, and tried to make plans.

"I won't tell her," he decided at last. "I'll see the admiral, and he will advise me what to do."

He altered his mind directly. "It will be betraying poor Malcolm," he thought; but swayed round again directly after.

"I ought to tell him," he said. "It is a duty. He stood to him almost in the position of a father, and, for Myra's sake, ought to know; and Heaven knows I want someone to advise me now."

He changed his plans half a dozen times before he reached the square; but that of telling the admiral under a pledge of secrecy was in the ascendant when the cab drew up at the door.



It was opened by Andrews.

"The admiral in?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, but he's asleep in the libery. Miss Myra is in her chamber, sir—not very well to-night, but Miss Edith is in the drawing room."

Guest went upstairs, and, upon entering, Edie rushed at him, when all his plans went for naught.

"Oh, how long you have been," she panted, as she caught his hands. "Have you seen him?"

"Yes."

"Have you found out anything?"

"Yes."

"Is it dreadful?"

"Too dreadful to tell you, dearest," he replied sadly.

"Then I won't know," she said, with a sob. "Oh, my poor, darling Myra! She will die of a broken heart, I know, I know."

Guest tried to comfort her, and she grew more calm.

"It was good and honest of you to come straight to me, to tell me, Percy," she said, submitting to his embraces; and Guest felt horribly guilty, and wished he had not come.

"It is dreadful, you say?"

"Terrible, little one," he whispered.

"Too terrible for me to know? Then I must not hear it, I suppose?"

"No,"

"But you know it, Percy," she said piteously; "it's too terrible, then, for you."

"I have been trying hard to find out the cause of his conduct."

"And you have found it out now?"

"Yes; and I'd give anything to be as ignorant as I was yesterday."

"Oh, but, Percy, dear," she whispered excitedly, "I must know that."



"I cannot—I dare not tell you."

"Not tell me—and you said you loved me!"

"As I do with all my heart."

"Then you cannot keep anything from me."

"I'll tell your uncle, and ask his opinion first."

"No, no, Percy. I must know now—I must, indeed. No matter how terrible, you cannot keep it from me."

"But it is like betraying the man whom I'd give anything to save."

"Save? Save from what?"

"Don't press me, dearest," he said tenderly. "Trust me that it is best for you not to know."

"Percy, dear," she said gently, as she laid her hand upon his arm; "you can trust me. I always knew there must be something very terrible to make Mr. Stratton behave toward poor Myra as he did, and you and I have been plotting and planning to find it out, in the hope that it would prove to be a trouble we could bridge over, and bring them together again. You have discovered it all then at last?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me."

"I cannot—I dare not."

Edie was silent for a few moments, as she sat gazing straight before her into the dimly lit back drawing room, her eyes suffused with tears, as she at last said in a whisper:

"You asked me the other day if I would be your wife."

"And you promised me an answer when I knew all," said Guest, cutting the ground from beneath his feet.

"And now you know, and I'll tell you," she said, hardly above her breath. "Yes, Percy, some day when we have made poor Myra happy."

"Then it will never be," he said despairingly.

"Let me judge," she whispered. And he told her all.



"But—but I don't quite understand," she faltered; "you think, then—oh, it is too horrible—you think, then, he had killed poor Mr. Brettison, his friend?"

"Yes," said Guest slowly and thoughtfully. "It must have been that. I cannot see a doubt."

"Ah!"

They started to their feet at the piteous sigh which came from the back drawing room; and it was followed by a heavy fall.

Myra had entered in time enough to hear the terrible charge, and for her life seemed to be at an end.

Meanwhile Stratton had stood motionless, gazing down into the dark pit formed by the staircase, with the light of the lamp he held shining full on his haggard face, made more painful by the smile which contracted the lower parts of his countenance, till the last echo of his friend's steps died out, when he turned slowly and walked into his room, closing and fastening both doors.

Then his whole manner changed.

He rushed to the table, set down the lamp so that the glass shade rattled and nearly flew out of the holder; then, crossing quickly to a cabinet, he took out a decanter and glass, poured out a heavy draught of brandy, and gulped it down.

The glass almost dropped from his hand to the table, and he clasped his brow, to stand staring before him fighting to recall his thoughts.

Twice over he threw his head back, and shook it as if something compressed his brain and confused him. Then the stimulant he had taken began to act, and he went to a drawer and took out a new screw-driver, with which, after seeing that the blinds were down and the curtains drawn over the window, he crossed to the door on the left of the fireplace; but only to turn away again, and take up the lamp and place



it on a stand, so that it should light him in the work he had in hand.

He was alert and eager now, as, with deft touches, he forced the screw-driver under a piece of molding at the top and front edge of the door, wrenched them off, and bared some half dozen screw-heads. These he rapidly turned and withdrew, laying them down one by one till all were out, when, from an inner pocket, he took out a key, unlocked the door, threw it open, and went into the bathroom, lamp in hand.

Placing it on the polished lid, he rapidly toiled on till these screws were taken out in turn, when, lifting the lamp with his left hand, he threw up the lid with his right, and stood staring down into the bath with a shudder, which rapidly passed away.

The lid fell with a heavy, dull sound, and, with a curious, wondering look, he turned and went slowly back to his table, set down the lamp, caught it up again, and walked into the bathroom, where he again set down the lamp, tore a fly-leaf from a letter in his pocket, folded it into a spill, and lit it at the lamp chimney.

“Will it burn slowly or explode at once?” he said, with a reckless laugh. “Let’s see!” and once more he threw up the lid.



## CHAPTER XL.

### FOR HIS SAKE.

EDIE rushed to her cousin where she lay prone on the carpet, her face turned toward the shaded lamp, which threw its soft light upon her face, and, even then, in her horror, the girl thought had never looked so beautiful before, while, as Guest, full of remorse, joined her, he felt ready to bite out his tongue in impotent rage against himself for a boyish babbler in making known to two gentle woman his fearful discovery at the chambers,

“Shall I ring?” he said excitedly; and he was halfway to the bell before Edie checked him.

“Ring? No; you absurd man!” she cried impatiently. “Lock the doors. Nobody must know of this but us. Here, quick, water.”

Guest was hurrying to obey the businesslike little body’s orders about the doors when she checked him again.

“No, no; it would make matters worse. Nobody is likely to come till uncle leaves the library. Water. Throw those flowers out of that great glass bowl.”

Guest obeyed, and bore the great iridescent vessel, from which he had tossed some orchids, to her side.

“That’s right. Hold it closer. Poor darling! My dearest Myra, what have you done to have to suffer all this terrible pain?”

There were drops other than the cold ones to besprinkle the white face Edie had lifted into her lap, as she sat on the floor, bending down from time to time to kiss the marble forehead and contracted eyelids as she spoke.

“Percy, dear,” she said, as he knelt by her, helpful, but,



in spite of the trouble, full of mute worship for the clever little body before him.

His eyes met hers, and flashed their delight, as the second word seemed to clinch others which she had spoken that night.

"This is all a secret. Even uncle must not know yet till we have had a long talk with aunt. She can be quite like a lawyer in giving advice."

"But, Edie!"

"No, no; we can have no hesitation. What I say is right. I'm very fond of Malcolm Stratton; and, if he has done this dreadful thing, his punishment must not come through us."

"You're a little Queen of Sheba," he whispered passionately.

"Hush! That's not behaving like Solomon. Be wise, please. O Myra, Myra! Stop; there are some salts on the chimney-piece in the front room. No, no; stay! She is coming to."

For Myra turned her head slightly on one side, and muttered a few incoherent words in a low, weary tone; and at last opened her eyes to let them rest on Guest's face as he knelt by her.

There was no recognition for a few moments, as she lay back, gazing dreamily at him. Then thought resumed its power in her brain, and her face was convulsed by a spasm.

Starting up, she caught his arm.

"Is it all true?" she cried, in a low, husky whisper.

Guest gave her a pitying, appealing look, but he did not speak.

"Yes, it must be true," she said, as she rose to her feet, and stood supporting herself by Guest's arm, while Edie held her hand. "You have not told anyone?" she said eagerly.

"No; I came here as soon as I knew."



"Where is Mr. Stratton?"

"At his chambers."

"And you, his friend, have left him at such a time?"

"It was at his wish," said Guest gently; "his secret is safe with me."

"Yes. He trusts you. I trust you. Percy Guest, Edie, even if he is guilty, he must be saved. No, no, it could not be guilt. I must not be weak now. He may be innocent, and the law can be so cruel. Who knows what may be the cause!"

She pressed her hands to her temples for a few moments, and then the power to think grew clearer.

"Go to him—from me. Tell him I bid him leave England at once. Leave with him, if you can be of help. Stop. He is not rich. Edie, all the money you have. Mr. Guest, take this, too, and I will get more. Now go, and remember that you are his friend. Write to me and Edie, and we will send; but, though all is over, let me know that his life is safe."

Guest caught the hand she extended with her purse and Edie's, kissed it reverently, and closed the fingers tightly round the purses, and gently thrust them from him.

"What!" Myra cried passionately; "you refuse?"

"I want to help you both," he replied gravely.

"O Percy!" cried Edie, with the tears starting to her eyes, and her tone of reproach thrilled him.

"Don't speak to me like that," he said. "You mean well, but to do what you say is to condemn him at once in everybody's sight. It is all so foreign to my poor friend's nature that, even knowing what I do, I cling to the belief in his innocence."

"Yes; he must be innocent," cried Myra. "He could not be what you say."

"Then should I be right in taking money and your message, saying to him, though not in words—'Fly for your



life, like a hunted criminal'? I could not do it. Myra, Edie—think, pray, what you are urging. It would be better advice to him to say—'Give yourself up, and let a jury of your fellow-countrymen decide.' "

"No, no," cried Myra; "it is too horrible. You do not know; you cannot see what he is suffering—what his position is. I must act myself. It cannot, it cannot be true!"

"Myra!" whispered Edie, clinging to her.

"What? And you side against me, too?"

"No, no, dear! How can you speak such cruel words? You know I would do anything for your sake."

Half-mad with mental agony, Myra repulsed her with a bitter laugh.

"Anything but this," she cried. "There it is, plain enough. He speaks, and you cry 'Hearken! is he not wise.' He says, 'Let him be given up to justice for the mob to howl at him and say he must die.' Die? Oh, no, no, no, it is too horrible! He must—he shall be saved!"

In her agony she made a rush for the door, but before she was halfway there, she tottered, and would have fallen but for Guest's ready arm. He caught her just in time, and bore her to a couch, where she lay back sobbing hysterically for a few moments, but only to master her emotion, draw her cousin to her breast, and kiss her again and again before holding out her hand to Guest.

"Forgive me!" she whispered. "These long months of suffering have made me weak—half-mad. My lips spoke, not my heart. You are both wiser than I am. Help me, and tell me what to do."

"I will help you, and help him, in every way I can," said Guest gently, as he held the thin white hand in his. "Now let me talk coolly to you—let us look the matter plainly in the face, and see how matters stand. I am speaking



now as the lawyer, not as the friend—yes, as the friend, too; but our feelings must not carry us away.”

Myra struggled with her emotion, and pressed the hand which held hers firmly.

Guest was silent for a few moments and stood as if collecting his thoughts and reviewing his position.

“There is no need for taking any immediate steps,” he said. “The scene that took place to-night was forced on by my precipitancy, and the danger to Stratton has passed away. To-morrow I will see him again, and perhaps he will be more ready to take me into his confidence, for there is a great deal more to learn, I am sure.”

“It is not so bad as you imagined.”

“After what took place to-night I can’t say that,” Guest replied sadly; “but there are points I have not yet grasped. An accident—a fit of passion—a great deal more than I have yet learned.”

“Then go to him to-night,” said Myra eagerly. “I will go with you. He shall not think that all who love forsake him in the hour of his need.”

“Myra !”

“I cannot help it,” she cried, springing up. “Did I not go to him when that suspicion clung to him—that he was treacherous and base? Even then in my heart I felt it could not be true. Yes, I know what you say; he has tacitly confessed to this dreadful crime, but we do not know all. I saw that Malcolm Stratton could not be base. If he has taken another’s life, I know, I feel all the horror; but he has not been false or treacherous to the woman he loved, and it was on account of this horror that he shrank back that day. To insult—to treat me with contempt? No; to spare me, Edie; and my place is at his side.”

“No, not now,” said Guest firmly. “I will go back to-night. Trust me, please, and have faith in my trying to do what is for the best.”



There was a few moments' silence, and then Myra spoke again faintly, but with more composure.

"Yes, we trust you, Mr. Guest. Don't think any more about what I said. Come to me again soon with news. I shall be dying for your tidings. Yes," she said, with a weary sigh, as she clung to his hand, "dying for your news. Only promise me this; that you will not deceive me in any way. If it is good or bad, you will come."

"You must know," said Guest quietly, "sooner or later. I will come and tell you everything."

"Then go now—go to him."

"Your father? He will think it strange that I have been and gone without seeing him."

"No; you have been to see us. I will tell him everything when we are alone. Good-night."

"Good-night."

Guest hurried back to the inn, but all was dark there; and, on going on to Sarum Street, he knocked at the door in vain.

"I can do no more," he said; and he went slowly back to his own rooms.



## CHAPTER XLI.

### AT FAULT.

**I**T was from no dread of the consequences likely to ensue that Malcolm Stratton paused with the burning paper in his hand. He knew that he had but to drop it into the clear fluid beneath, for this to burst out into a dancing crater of blue and orange flames. He knew, too, that the old woodwork with which the antique place was lined would rapidly catch fire, and that in a short time the chambers would be one roaring, fiery furnace, and the place be doomed before the means of extinction could arrive. He had no fear for self, for he felt that there would be time enough to escape if he wished to save his life. But he did not drop the blazing paper; letting it burn right to his fingers, and then crushing it in his hand.

“There is no reason,” he muttered, as he turned slowly back to his room. “It would be madness now; there is nothing to conceal.”

He sank into his chair, and sat back thinking and trying to piece together all that had passed since the day when, full of life, joy, and eagerness, he was ready to hurry off to the church. But his long confinement, with neglect of self, and the weary hours he had passed full of agony and despair, had impaired his power of arranging matters in a calm, logical sequence, and he had to go twice to his bedroom to bathe his burning head.

There was one point at which he sought to arrive—his present position, and what he should do next. It came to him at last, and then he worked himself up to the grasping



of the facts, till a mist came over his brain, and all glided away, leaving his mind blank.

For it was all one terrible confusion, mainly due to the fearful mental strain to which he had been exposed during the past few hours ; and at last he sat there holding his throbbing brow, feeling that he could think of everything but the one point to which he strove.

At one moment Guest's horrified face was before him, and in a puzzled way he felt that his friend had left him with the idea that he had slain Brettison, and that he ought to have made that portion of his trouble clear to him ; but at that time it was as if he were fettered by the horrors of a nightmare-like dream.

But he waved these thoughts aside. They were as nothing to the terrible perplexity he had to master, and the first step toward that mastery was to find Brettison, whom he had last seen on the morning appointed for the wedding, wishing him happiness and every good thing which could fall to a bridegroom's lot.

And now ? What did it all mean ? How could he clear up the chaos which bade fair to wreck his brain. Brettison could not have returned ; and yet how strange it all was ! What could he do ?

One thing shone out, however, clearly ; and that was the knowledge that he could come back here and stay without being haunted by the presence of a great horror close at hand. He even began to grasp the fact that, for a long time past, he had been needlessly shunning his rooms and living away in a morbid state, always dreading discovery ; and opening his doors at every visit, fully expecting to find himself face to face with the police, waiting to trap him in his lair.

How he had suffered ! How he had stolen to his chambers at night, creeping up to his door furtively, and, after entering, examining the closet, and making sure



that it had not been tampered with and opened in his absence.

It had been a terrible period of agony, such as had turned him old before his time ; and now he had discovered that his suffering and dread had been vain and empty ; that he had stayed away from the inn for naught, unless all this was imagination ; another of the horrible nightmare dreams by which he had been haunted ever since that dreadful day.

At last he grew calmer, and felt able to look matters in the face. The great horror had passed away, and in so passing it had roused him to action. There was work to do, a strange complication to solve ; and he settled in his own mind how that was to be done.

He must find Brettison at once ; and the great question was : Where could he be ?

Here was a grand difficulty at once. Where would a man like Brettison be likely to sojourn ?—a man who ranged through the length and breadth of the country in pursuit of his specimens.

In an ordinary way. But what would he be doing now, and what had he done ?

Stratton shuddered, and pictured a strange scene, one upon which he dare not dwell ; and, leaping up, he took matches and a candle with the intention of going to his friend's room to try and pick up the clew there ; but by the time he reached his door he was face to face with the first obstacle. Brettison's door was locked again, and, without re-summoning the help they had had that evening, entrance was impossible.

Taking the lamp he entered the bath closet to try the old door at the end ; but this was firmly screwed up again, and unless he broke through one of the panels, entrance was impossible that way.

Stratton returned to his chair, hesitating to take so ex-



treme a course ; and sitting down he tried to think out a likely place for Brettison to have gone.

As he thought, he called to mind various places where he knew him to have stayed in the past ; and selecting one at haphazard—an old world place in Kent—he determined to start for there at once, perfectly aware of the wildness of the scheme and how easily he might spend his life in such a chase, but there was nothing else to be done. He could trust no one—get no help. It must be his own work entirely. Brettison was master of his secret, and there could be no rest for him until the old man was found.

He started at once, hurrying away from his carefully closed-up chambers by the northern gate, so that he should not be seen at the porter's lodge, and was halfway to the station when a thought assailed him, which made him turn back, suffering all the agony of a guilty man in dread of discovery.

Brettison could not have taken that body away from the chambers ; such a task was impossible without discovery. It must, after all, be hidden somewhere within his rooms.

He turned into an embayment over a pier of the bridge he was crossing, and sat down to think. He knew Brettison's rooms so well—as well as his own. Where could the body be concealed ?

He mentally wandered from one room to the other, and paused in a little pantry-like place, peering into each nook and corner, and searching every article of furniture likely to contain a bulky object ; but all in vain.

Then he recalled the fact that the police officer—a man of experience—had searched carefully and given the matter up. Still Brettison must have practiced a great deal of cunning for his friend's sake, and there was no knowing what he might have done. There were the floors of the



rooms—boards might have been taken up, and concealment made between the joists; or there was the wainscot; some panel might have been taken out in front of a recess, and the body placed there.

But Stratton shook his head, and his chin went down upon his chest in despair. There were sufficient reasons for Brettison not choosing such a hiding place as that. Detection in a short time was certain.

“Seems impossible,” thought Stratton; “but he must have taken it away.”

“Hadn’t you better go home?” said a gruff voice.

Stratton looked up, to find a burly policeman had stopped by his side, and was watching him keenly.

“Go—go home?” stammered Stratton.

“Yes, sir; that’s what I said. You don’t look well, and when people come and sit down here, feeling as you do, they sometimes lets their feelings get the better of ’em and jump off. Next moment they’re sorry for it, and call for help, often enough when no help can come. You go home, sir, and have a day or two in bed. You’ll come out again like a new man.”

Stratton frowned.

“You are making a mistake,” he said quietly. “I had no such thought as you imagine.”

“Glad of it, sir. You’ll excuse me. You know that sort of thing happens here so often that we’re obliged to keep a sharp lookout.”

Stratton’s mind was made up once more, and he hastened off to the station, caught a later train, and in two hours was down in the old village, with its quaint ivy-covered hostelry and horse-trough ornamented with the mossy growth that dotted the boles of the grand old forest trees around.

The landlady met him with a smile of welcome which faded after his questions.

Oh, yes, she remembered Mr. Brettison, and his green



tin candle-box and bright trowel very well. He was the gentleman who used to bring home weeds in his umbrella ; but it was a long time since he had been down there. It was only a week ago that she was saying to her master how she wondered that that gentleman had not been down for so long. But wouldn't he come in and have some refreshment ?

No, Stratton would not come in and have some refreshment, for he went back to town instantly.

This was an example of many such blind ventures ; all carried out in the face of the feeling of despair which racked him ; and the time glided on, with hope goading him to fresh exertions in the morning, despair bidding him, in the darkness of the night, give up, and accept his fate.

In course of time, Stratton visited every place in England that he could recall as one of Brettison's haunts, but always with the same result ; and then in a blind, haphazard way, he began to wander about town.

The consequence was that he was rarely at his rooms, and letter after letter was left for him by Guest, who reiterated his demands to see him, and asked for appointments in vain.

But, in spite of the constant checks to which he was subjected, the desire to find his old friend only increased ; and, after sitting half the night thinking what to do next, Stratton would snatch a few hours' sleep, and start off again, feeling sure that he had hit upon the right clew at last.

For there was always some place that he had not searched. The greater museums and institutes he had visited again and again, and at all hours, hoping to find the old man buried in some book, or closely examining some specimen ; but the minor places only came to mind by degrees, and day succeeded day in which he went about, haggard and weary-eyed, always looking for the slight, gray old man from whom he had parted on what was to have been his wedding day.

And all the time he had a kind of presentiment that the



old man was aware of the search being carried on after him, and was, consequently, hiding away, but, perhaps, keeping an eye upon his proceedings.

It was impossible to give up, for he felt that the old man must at any cost be found ; and at last he spent his days wandering dreamily about the streets, trying to solve the difficulty—watching the passers-by, and asking himself whether there were any means he had left untried—whether there was any friend or acquaintance he could question as to his whereabouts.

But Brettison had no friends or acquaintances, as far as he knew. He had been to his solicitor, who smiled, and said that his client was, in all probability, studying mosses or lichens in the Alps, and would come back some day ; to his banker, who was reticent at first, and then, upon seeing his visitor's anxiety, readily stated that his checks had been cashed quite lately, which proved him to be about, but where he could not say.

Everything seemed to have been done, but still day after day Stratton traversed London streets in a never wearying search, trusting to chance to help him, though perfectly aware that he might go on for years and never meet the man he sought.

Chance did aid him at last ; for one day he had turned out of Fleet Street to go northward, and as he passed along the broad highway—wishing that he could explain everything to Guest and bring other wits to his help, instead of fighting the weary battle in silence alone—he suddenly stepped out into the road to cross to the other side, to an old bookseller's shop, where the man made a specialty of natural history volumes. It was a shop where he and Brettison had often spent an hour picking out quaint works on their particular subjects, and he was thinking that possibly the man might have seen Brettison and be able to give him some information, when there was the rattle



of wheels, a loud shout, and he sprang out of the way of a fast driven hansom.

The driver yelled something at him in passing, by no means complimentary ; but Stratton hardly heard it. He stood, rooted to the spot, gazing after the cab ; for, in the brief moment, as he started away, he had caught sight of the pale, worn face of Brettison, whose frightened, scared gaze had met his. Then he had passed without making a sign, and Stratton was gazing after the cab in speechless horror, for upon the roof, extending right across, and so awkwardly placed that the driver half stood in his seat and rested his hands upon it with the reins, was a large, awkward-looking deal box, evidently heavy, for the cab was tilted back and the shafts rose high, as if the balance was enough to hoist the horse from the pavement.

At last ! And that scared look of the pale-faced man, and the strange, heavy case on the cab-roof, with every suggestion of haste, while he stood there in the middle of the road as if a victim to nightmare, till the quickly driven vehicle was too far off for him to read the number.

Suddenly the power to move came back, and, dashing forward in the middle of the road, Stratton shouted to the man to stop.

“ He won’t stop—not likely,” growled another cabman, who had seen Stratton’s escape. “ Shouldn’t loaf across the—— Here, sir,” he cried suddenly, as a thought flashed across his brain. “ Hi ! guv’nor ; jump in—I’ll ketch him for you.”

He whipped his horse up alongside of Stratton, who caught at the idea, and, seizing the side of the cab, sprang in.

“ Quick ! Five shillings if you keep that cab in sight.”

The wide road was open, and pretty free from vehicles, and the horse went fast, but the cab in which Brettison was seated had a good start, reached the cross street, and



entered the continuation of that which he was pursuing. Stratton's man drove up as a number of vehicles were crowding to go east and west, and the flow of those from north and south was stopped by a stalwart policeman ; while raging at the sudden check, Stratton ground his teeth with rage.

" All right, sir," came down through the little trap in the roof ; " he'll let us go acrost directly, and I'll ketch up the cab in no time."

They were not arrested much above a minute, but the interval was sufficient to give Brettison's cab a good start, and when leave was given to go, the case on the roof was invisible, and the question arose in Stratton's mind—which way had it gone ? into one of the station yards, or straight on over the bridge into South London ?

He raised himself a little to peer over the horse's head, but he could see nothing, and turning round, he thrust up the trap.

" Faster—faster ! " he cried. " You must overtake it. Faster ! "

" All right, sir," shouted the man hoarsely ; and crack ! crack ! went the long heavy whip on one and then on the other side of the well-bred but worn-out screw between the shafts.

The result was a frantic plunge forward, and though the driver dragged at and worked the bit savagely, the horse tore on at a gallop for about fifty yards, with the cab swaying from side to side ; then the tiny flash of equine fire died out, and the horse's knees gave way. Down it went with a crash. Stratton was dashed forward heavily against the curved splash-board, to which he clung, and the next thing he saw was the driver rising from somewhere beside the horse, that lay quite still now on its side, while shouts, the faces of people who crowded up, and the vehicles that passed on either side, all seemed dim, confused, and distant.



Then bells of a curiously sharp, quick tone were ringing loudly in his ears.

"Hurt, sir?"

"Yes—no; I think not. Quick, stop that cab," said Stratton huskily; but, as he spoke, he knew it was in a confused way, and that for his life he could not have explained what cab.

"It's far enough off by this time, sir," said a voice beside him, "and if you aint hurt, I am. Never went in training for a hacrobat. Here, Bobby, help us up with the fiery untamed steed. That's the seccun time he's chucked me over the roof. Wait a moment, sir, and I'll drive you on; we may ketch 'em yet. Don't do a man out of his fare."

"Too late," was all Stratton could think of then. "I could not overtake it now."

And in a dim, misty way he seemed to be watching Brettison hurrying away with that heavy, awkward case which contained——

Yes," he muttered with a shudder, "it must be that."



## CHAPTER XLII.

BY A RUSE.

SUCH a chance did not come in Stratton's way again. "If I had drunk that when Guest came and interrupted me—when was it? Two years and more ago," sighed Stratton one night, "what an infinity of suffering I should have been spared. All the hopes and disappointments of that weary time, all the madness and despair of the morning when that wretched convict came, all my remorse, my battles with self, the struggles to conceal my crime—all—all spared to me ; for I should have been asleep."

A curious doubting smile crossed his face slowly at these thoughts ; and, resting his cheek upon his hand, with the light full upon his face, he gazed straight before him into vacancy.

"How do I know that?" he thought. "Could I, a self-murderer, assure myself that I should have sunk into oblivion like that—into a restful sleep, free from the cares I had been too cowardly to meet and bear? No, no, no ; it was not to be. Thank God ! I was spared from that."

"But mine has been a cruel lot," he continued ; "stroke after stroke that would have been kinder had they killed ; for the misery has not been mine alone. I could have borne it better if it had been so. Poor Myra—poor girl ! Yours has been a strange fate, too."

And his thoughts were filled by her pain-wrung features, and wild, appealing look last time they met, when she had clung to him there, and appealed to him to forget the past, for she would forgive everything and take him to her heart and face with him the whole world.



He shuddered.

“Poor, blind, loving heart! ready to kiss the hand wet with her husband’s blood.” It was too horrible—too terrible to bear.

He hid his face in his hands for a few minutes, but grew calmer as he went on reviewing the past; and from time to time a slight shiver ran through him, as he thought of what he had done, and the mad plan he had made to utterly conceal his crime by fire.

“But that’s all past now,” he said at last, with a sigh of relief. “That horror has been taken from my load, and I will, as a man, fight hard to meet whatever comes. Heaven knows my innocence, and will find me strength to bear it all; and, perhaps, some day, give me—give her forgetfulness and rest.”

He looked sharply up and listened, for he fancied that he heard a sound; but a step faintly beating on the paving outside seemed to accord with it, and he went on musing again about Brettison, wondering where he could be, and how he could contrive to keep hidden away from him as he did.

“If we could only meet,” he said, half aloud—“only stand face to face for one short hour, how different my future might be.”

“No,” he said aloud, after a thoughtful pause, “how can I say that? *L’homme propose et Dieu dispose*. We are all bubbles on the great stream of life.”

He half started from his chair, listening again, for he felt convinced that he heard a sound outside his doors, and going across, he opened them softly and looked out, but the grim, ill-lit staircase and the hall below were blank and silent, and satisfied that he had been mistaken, he went back to his seat to begin musing again, till once more there was a faint sound, and as he listened he became conscious of a strange, penetrating odor of burning.



Stratton's face grew ghastly with the sudden emotion that had attacked him, and for a few moments he sat trembling, and unable to stir from his seat.

"At last!" he said in a whisper; "at last!" and, conscious that the time had come for which he had longed and toiled so hard, he felt that the opportunity was about to slip away, for he would be unable to bear the encounter, if not too much prostrated by his emotion to rise from his seat.

It was only a trick of the nerves, which passed off directly; and he rose then, firm and determined, to cross gently to first one and then the other door by his mantelpiece, where he stood, silent and intent, breathing deeply.

Yes; there was no doubt now. He was inhaling the penetrating, peculiar odor of strong tobacco; and at last Brettison must have returned, and be sitting there smoking his eastern water pipe.

Stratton drew softly back, as if afraid of being heard, though his steps were inaudible on the thick carpet, and he stood there thinking.

"If I go," he said to himself, "he will not answer my knock." And feeling now that Brettison might have been back before now unknown to him, he tried to think out some plan by which he could get face to face with his friend.

A thought came directly, and it seemed so childish in its simplicity that he smiled and was ready to give it up; but it grew in strength and possibility as he looked round and took from a table, where lay quite a little heap that had been thrust into his letter box from time to time, four or five unopened circulars and foolscap missives, whose appearance told what they were; and armed with these he opened his doors softly and passed out, drawing the outer door to, and then stole on tiptoe downstairs and out into the dimly lit square.



“He will not notice that it is so late,” he said to himself, as he looked up and saw just a faint gleam of light at Brettison’s window, where the drawn curtain was not quite close.

Stratton paused for a moment, and drew a long breath before attempting to act the part upon which he had decided. Then, going on some twenty or thirty yards, he turned and walked back with a heavy, decided, business-like step, whistling softly as he went, right to the entry, where, still whistling, he ascended the stairs to his door, thrust in and drew out a letter-packet thrice, making the metal flap of the box rattle, gave a sharp double knock, and then crossed the landing and went the few steps, whistling still, along the passage to Brettison’s door. Here he thrust in, one by one, three circulars, with a good deal of noise, through [the letter-flap, gave the customary double knock, went on whistling softly, and waited a moment or two ; and then, as he heard a faint sound within, gave another sharp double rap, as a postman would who had a registered letter, or a packet too big to pass through the slit.

The ruse was successful, and with beating heart Stratton stood waiting a little on one side, as there was the click and grate of the latch, and the door was opened a little way.

That was enough. Quick as lightning, Stratton seized and dragged it wide, to step in face to face with Brettison, who started back in alarm and was followed up by his friend, who closed both doors carefully, and then stood gazing at the bent, gray-headed, weak old man, who had shrunk back behind the table, whereon the pipe stood burning slowly, while the unshaded lamp showed a dozen or so of freshly opened letters on the table, explaining their owner’s visit there.

Stratton did not speak, but gazed fiercely at the trembling old man, who looked wildly round as if for some weapon to



defend himself, but shook his head sadly, and, with a weary smile, came away from his place of defense.

"Your trick has succeeded, sir," he said quietly. "Seventy-two! Has the time come? I ought not to fear it now."

Stratton uttered a harsh sound—half-gasp, half-cry.

"Well," continued Brettison, who looked singularly aged and bent since they had last stood face to face, "you have found me at last."

Stratton's lips parted, but no sound came; his emotion was too great.

"It will be an easy task," said Brettison, with a piteous look at Stratton. "No sounds are heard outside these chambers—not even pistol shots."

There was an intense bitterness in those last words which made the young man shrink, and as Brettison went on, "I shall not struggle against my fate," he uttered a cry of bitterness and rage.

"Sit down!" he said fiercely. "Why do you taunt me like this? You have been here before from time to time. Why have you hidden from me like this?"

"I have my reasons," said Brettison slowly. "Why have you come?"

"You ask me that!"

"Yes. You have hunted me for months now, till my life has been worthless. Have you come to take it now?"

"Why should I take your life?"

"To save your own. You believe I heard or witnessed—that."

He paused before uttering the last word, and pointed to the door on his left.

Stratton could not suppress a shudder; but, as he saw the peculiar way in which the old man's eyes were fixed upon his, a feeling of resentment arose within him, and his voice sounded strident and harsh when he spoke again.



"I had no such thoughts," he said. "You know better, sir. Come, let us understand one another. I am reckless now."

"Yes," said Brettison coldly.

"Then, if you have any fear for your life, you can call for help ; that is, for someone to be within call to protect you, for what we have to say must be for our ears alone."

Brettison did not answer for a few moments, during which time he watched the other narrowly.

"I am not afraid, Malcolm," he said ; and he seated himself calmly in his chair. Then, motioning to another, he waited until Stratton was seated.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I have been here from time to time to get my letters."

"Why have you hidden yourself away?" cried Stratton fiercely.

"Ah ! Why ?" said Brettison, gazing at him thoughtfully from beneath his thick, gray eyebrows. "You want a reason ? Well, I am old and independent, with a liking to do what I please. Malcolm Stratton, I am not answerable to any man for my actions."

Stratton started up, and took a turn to and fro in the dusty room before throwing himself again in his chair, while the old man quietly took the long, snake-like tube of his pipe in hand, examined the bowl to find it still alight, began to smoke with all the gravity of a Mussulman, and the tobacco once more began to scent the air of the silent place.

Stratton's lips parted again and again, but no words would come. In his wild excitement and dread of what he knew he must learn, he could not frame the questions he panted to ask in this crisis of his life, and at last it was with a cry of rage as much as appeal that he said :

"Man, man, am I to be tortured always ? Why don't you speak ?"



"You have hunted me from place to place, Malcolm Stratton, in your desperation to find out that which I felt you had better not know ; and now you have found me—brought me to bay—I wait for you to question me."

"Yes, yes," said Stratton hoarsely ; and, with a hasty gesture, as he clapped his hand to his throat, "I will speak—directly."

He rose again and paced the room, and it was while at the far end that he said in a low voice :

"Yes ; you know all."

"All."

"Tell me, then—why have you done this ? Stop ! I am right—it was you."

"You are right ; it was I," said Brettison, smoking calmly, as if they were discoursing upon some trivial matter instead of a case of life and death—of the horror that had blasted a sanguine man's life, and made him prematurely old.

"Tell me, then ; how could you—how could you dare ? Why did you act the spy upon my actions ?"

The old man rose quickly from his chair, brought his hand down heavily upon the table, and leaned forward to gaze in Stratton's eyes.

"Answer me first, boy. Me—the man who loved you and felt toward you as if you were a son ! Why did you not come to me for help and counsel when you stood in danger—in peril of your life ?"

The gentle, mild face of the old botanist was stern and judicial now, his tone of voice full of reproof. It was the judge speaking, and not the mild old friend.

"Did you think me—because I passed my life trifling, as some call it, with flowers, but, as I know it to be, making myself wiser in the works of my great Creator—did you think me, I say, so weak and helpless a creature that I could not counsel—so cowardly and wanting in strength of



mind and faith in you, that I would not have stood by you as a father should stand by his son?"

Stratton groaned.

"Forgive me," he said feebly; "I was half mad."

"Yes."

"How could I, crushed by the horror of having taken a fellow-creature's life, cursed by the knowledge that this man was—— But you cannot know that."

"Take it, boy, that I know everything," said the old man, resuming his seat.

"Then have some pity on me."

"Pity for your folly? Yes."

"Folly! You are right. I will take it that you know everything, and speak out now. Brettison——"

He paused—he could not speak. But by a mighty effort he mastered his emotion.

"Now think, and find some excuse for me. I was in my room there, elate almost beyond a man's power to imagine; in another hour the woman whom I had idolized for years was to be my wife. Recollect that, two years before, my hopes had been dashed to the ground, and I had passed through a time of anguish that almost unhinged my brain, so great was my despair."

"Yes," said Brettison, "I recall all that."

"Then that man came, and I was face to face with the knowledge that once more my hopes were crushed, and—he fell."

Stratton ceased speaking, and sat gazing wildly before him into the past.

It was in a husky whisper that he resumed:

"I stood there, Brettison, mad with horror, distraught with the knowledge that I was the murderer of her husband—that my hand, wet with his blood, could never again clasp hers, even though I had made her free."

The old man bent his head; and, gathering strength of



mind and speech, now that he was at last speaking out openly in his defense, Stratton went on :

“ It was horrible—horrible ! There it is, all back again before my eyes, and I feel again the stabbing, sickening pain of the bullet wound which scored my shoulder, mingled with the far worse agony of my brain. I had killed her husband—the escaped convict ; and, above the feeling that all was over now, that my future was blasted, came the knowledge that, as soon as I called for help, as soon as the police investigated the matter, my life was not worth a month’s purchase. For what was my defense ? ”

Brettison sat in silence, smoking calmly.

“ That this man had made his existence known to me, shown by his presence that his supposed death was a shadow—that, after his desperate plunge into the sea, he had managed to swim ashore and remain in hiding ; the dark night’s work and the belief that he had fallen shot, being his cloak ; and the search for the body of a convict soon being at an end. You see all this ? ”

Brettison bowed his head.

“ Think, then, of my position ; put yourself in my place. What jury—what judge would believe my story that it was an accident ? It seemed to me too plain. The world would say that I slew him in my disappointment and despair. Yes, I know they might have called it manslaughter, but I must have taken his place—a convict in my turn.”

“ You thought that ? ”

“ Yes, I thought that—I think it now. I could not—I dared not speak. Everything was against me, and in my horror temptation came.”

Brettison looked at him sharply.

“ The hope was so pitiful, so faint, so weak, Brettison ; but still it would linger in my maddened brain that some day in the future—after years, maybe, of expiation of the deed—I might, perhaps, approach her once again. I



thought so then. The secret would be between me and my Maker, and in his good time he might say to my heart : ‘ It is enough. You have suffered all these years. Your sin is condoned—your punishment is at an end.’ I tell you I thought all that, and in my madness I dared not let the thing be known. She would know it, too, and if she did I felt that hope would be dead indeed, and that I had, too, better die.”

Stratton ceased speaking, and let his head fall upon his hand.

“ Put yourself in my place, I say. Think of yourself as being once more young and strong—the lover of one whom, in a few short hours, you would have clasped as your wife, and then try and find excuse for my mad action—for I know now that it was mad, indeed.”

“ Yes, mad indeed,” muttered Brettison.

“ Well, I need say no more. You know so much, you must know the rest. They came to me, fearing I had been killed—robbed and murdered. They found me at last, when I was forced to admit them, looking, I suppose, a maniac ; for I felt one then, compelled to face them, and hear the old man’s reproaches, in horror lest they should discover the wretched convict lying dead, and no word to say in my defense. Nature could bear no more. My wound robbed me of all power to act, and I fainted—to come to, fearing that all was discovered ; but their imaginations had led them astray. They had found my wound and the pistol. It was an attempt at suicide. Poor Guest recalled the first—I do not wonder. And they went away at last, looking upon me as a vile betrayer of the woman I loved, and sought in their minds for the reason of my despair, and the cowardly act I had attempted to escape her father’s wrath. Brettison, old friend, I make no excuses to you now ; but was I not sorely tried ? Surely, few men in our generation have stood in such a dilemma. Can you feel



surprised that, stricken from my balance as a man—a sane and thoughtful man—I should have acted as I did, and dug for myself a pit of such purgatory as makes me feel now, as I sit here making my confession, how could I have gone through so terrible a crisis and yet be here alive, and able to think and speak like a suffering man.”

The silence in the room was terrible for what seemed an age before Brettison stretched out his trembling hand and took that of the man before him.

“Hah !”

Malcolm Stratton’s low cry. It was that of a man who had long battled with the waves of a great storm, and who had at last found something to which he could cling.

There was another long and painful pause before Stratton spoke again, and then he slowly withdrew his hand.

“No,” he said ; “we must never clasp hands again. I must go on to the end a pariah among my kind.”

Brettison shook his head.

“I have put myself in your place often,” he said slowly, “and I have felt that I might have acted much the same.”

Stratton looked at him eagerly.

“Yes ; my great fault in you is that you should not have trusted me.”

There was again a long silence before Stratton spoke.

“I felt that I was alone in the world to fight my own battle with all my strength,” he said wearily.

“And that strength was so much weakness, boy. Mine, weak as it is, has proved stronger far.”

Stratton looked at him wonderingly.

“Yes ; how much agony you might have been spared, perhaps, if you had come to me. But I don’t know—I don’t know. You acted as you thought best ; I only did the same, and, not knowing all your thoughts, I fear that I have erred.”



Stratton sat thinking for a few moments, and then, raising his eyes :

“I have told you all. It is your turn now.”

Brettison bowed his head.

“Yes,” he said, “it is better that I should speak and tell you.”

But he was silent for some time first, sitting back with the tips of his fingers joined, as if collecting his thoughts.

“You remember that morning—how I came to say good-by?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I started, and then found that I had forgotten my lens. I hurried back, and had just entered my room when I heard voices plainly in yours. My book-closet door was open, that of your bath room must have been ajar. I did not want to hear, but the angry tones startled me, and the words grew so fierce—you neither of you thought of how you raised your voices in your excitement—that I became alarmed, and was about to hurry round to your room, when a few words came to my ears quite plainly, and, in spite of its being dishonorable, I, in my dread that you were in danger, hurried into the book-closet and was drawn to the thin, loose panel at the end.

“There I was enchained; I could not retreat, for I heard so much of the piteous position in which you were placed. My mind filled in the blanks, and I grasped all.

“I need not repeat all you know—only tell you that, unable to master my curiosity, I placed my eye to one of the cracks in the old paneling, and could see the man's face—her husband's features—and I saw him glance again and again at the money, and felt that he meant to have it, though you seemed ignorant of the fact; and, dreading violence, I drew back to go for help. But I could not leave. It meant a terrible *exposé* and untold horror for your promised wife. I tell you I could not stir, and the



fact of my being a miserable eavesdropper died out in the terrible climax you had reached."

Brettison paused to wipe his brow, wet with a dew begotten by the agony of his recollections, before he continued :

"I stayed there then, and watched and listened, almost as near as if I had been a participator in the little life drama which ensued. There, I was with you in it all, boy—swayed by your emotions, but ready to cry out upon you angrily when I saw you ready to listen to the wretch's miserable proposals, and as proud when I saw your determination to sacrifice your desires and make a bold stand against what, for your gratification, must have meant finally a perfect hell for the woman you loved. Then, in the midst of my excitement, there came the final struggle, as you nobly determined to give the scoundrel up to the fate he deserved so well. It was as sudden to me as it was horrible. I saw the flash of the shot, and felt a pang of physical pain, as, through the smoke, I dimly saw you stagger. Then, while I stood there paralyzed, I saw you fly at him as he raised his pistol to fire again, the struggle for the weapon, which you struck up as he drew the trigger."

"Yes," said Stratton, "I struck up the pistol as he drew the trigger ; but who would believe—who would believe ?"

"And then I saw him reel and fall, and there before me he lay, with the blood slowly staining the carpet, on the spot where I had so often sat."

He wiped his brow again, while Stratton rested his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands, as if to hide from his gaze the scene his friend conjured up from the past.

"Malcolm Stratton," continued the old man, rising to lay his hand upon the other's head, "you were to me as a son. As a father loves the boy born unto him, I swear I felt toward you. I looked upon you as the son of my



childless old age, and I was standing there gazing at you, face to face with the horror of that scene, while, with crushing weight, there came upon me the knowledge that, come what might, I must summon help. That help meant the police; and, in imagination, I saw myself sending you to the dock, where you would perhaps, from the force of the circumstances—as you have told me you might—stand in peril of your life. But still I felt that there was nothing otherwise that could be done; and, slowly shrinking back, I was on my way to perform this act of duty, when I heard a low, deep groan. That drew me back, and, looking into your room once more, a mist rose between me and the scene, my senses reeled, and I slowly sank down, fainting, on the floor.”



## CHAPTER XLIII.

### THE REVELATION.

“**I**T was the act of a woman, Stratton,” said Brettison with an apologetic smile, “but I am only a weak old man, and never weaker than in those moments.

“I could not have been there a moment, and I must have glided down, or you would have heard me. I came to and for a moment could not understand why I was there. Then all came back with overwhelming force, and I crept back to the panel to look through.

“You were returning from the door, and the next moment were standing by the body, with the pistol in your hand, apparently unharmed ; and then, to my horror, it seemed as if you were about to use the weapon upon yourself ; but to my intense relief I saw you thrust it into your pocket, and then stand by the body as if reft of sense, utterly helpless as to what course to pursue. While sharing your misery I forgot my intentions of seeking help ; and nerving myself for the encounter I was about to come round, but your looks chained me to the spot, and, utterly helpless now, I stayed there watching your wild countenance and reading its meaning, as with an eager, hunted look you went to the outer door, opened it, and stood looking down. Then carefully closing both, you went to the window to peer out furtively from the side of the blind, as if to make out whether by any possibility anyone could have overlooked the scene.

“I knew that you had some plan in mind by your actions, and it rapidly dawned on me what it was, as, like one suffering from nightmare I stood watching, with the



cold sweat gathering on my face, as I saw you go toward the other side of the fireplace, come into sight again and take a chair in the same direction.

"I soon divined, though, that it was to hold open the door, and now came the horror of the scene."

Stratton uttered a low groan as he sat there with his face buried in his hands, and Brettison went on :

"It was all clear to me now. You were seeking for a way out of your terrible dilemma by concealing the body, and I looked on, speechless with horror, as I saw you stoop to seize the arms, droop forward, and fall across the chest."

"I was faint from my hurt," said Stratton, almost in a whisper.

"But you rose directly, and I saw you drag the body toward the door of your bathroom and, as if drawn there to know the rest, I came back here and stood listening by that loose panel, where the scene stood out as vividly before me as if I were in the same room."

Stratton groaned, while, excited by his narration, Brettison went on :

"You were evidently faint still, and weak, for I heard you stop again and again, only to resume the dreadful task of dragging the body along the floor, till at last you stood within a few feet of me, and I could hear your labored breathing for a few minutes, followed by a sound that I knew to be the throwing back of the bath lid ; and then followed what you know—that horrible struggle with a weight with which you were not fit to cope. A minute later the lid was closed and you shut and locked the bath closet door, while I sat down, faint and exhausted, to try and think out what I should do.

"I must have sat there for a long time, for I was roused by the sound of voices in your room, and heard the scene that took place with the admiral. I knew that you fainted,



and that Guest tried the door which you had locked ; and I shuddered as I thought of what that place contained, and how easily the discovery might follow.

“ By this time I had made up my mind how to act ; and, after stealing out to get the necessary tools, I waited my time and set to work. It was a long task, for I had to work and not make a sound ; but the old fastening soon gave way, and I drew the door open and stood shivering in the narrow place, with yours and Guest’s words coming plainly to me.

“ At times you were angry, at other times Guest spoke loudly, and twice over he had the outer door open to talk to people on the landing.

“ Those were my opportunities, and, helped by strength I did not think I possessed, I worked on, dragging the body out inch by inch, and lowering him down. A dozen times over I felt that I must be heard, but you were both too intent upon yourselves, and your words often rose to a quarrel on one side, and, as I said, at such times I worked, till at last I bore the man through the door and laid him there.”

He pointed to the heavy rug in front of the fireplace, and, as if fascinated, Stratton gazed at the spot.

“ The rest of the task was lighter for the moment ; I had but to close the door, and secure it slightly. I left the proper fastening up till a future time, and I’ll tell you that now—the fastening up took place at the time when you were working shudderingly in the dark, taking in cans of spirit, and pouring them gurgling and echoing into the bath ; and I heard all this, and the final screwing down of the lid and screwing up of your door. I tell you I heard it all, boy, and still worked on in your service.”

“ In my service ? ” said Stratton blankly.

“ Yes. Why did I do all this ? Did I not know that, in spite of all your scheming and precautions, sooner or later



the discovery must be made. Was I to let you live on with that horror waiting always at your elbow, driving you mad with dread, as I felt it was bound to do? It was for your sake, boy, that I fought as I did, and brought your victim out here."

"But tell me—what did you mean to do?"

"How can I, when my own ideas were all vague and strange, as I sat there that night with this"—he tapped his water-pipe—"and tried to hit on some plan; and somehow the horror passed away, and I felt no fear of the poor wretch lying there before me. I wondered at myself—that I could sit there so calmly smoking, in the face of all that had passed; but I did, for I said to myself, 'What is death, after all, but sleep?'"

"So I sat and thought, much as a man would under the circumstances—much as you did—and I felt that I had done right in this my first step toward saving you from the pain and suffering that was sure to come; for I had no doubt of the discovery. Then I argued that such a wretch was worthless, and that, even dead, he ought not to have the power to injure two people whom I loved. I knew that you meant to hide your——"

"Crime," interposed Stratton.

"I never looked upon it as a crime. Let us call it your misfortune in slaying another in the effort to save your own life. There, then, was my position. I had gone so far; and, difficult as the task had seemed, the task was easy beside that which was to come."

"Tell me what you did," said Stratton hoarsely.

"I tell you I sat down to think," said Brettison coolly, "and the more I thought the more impossible the task seemed to grow. I told myself that it must be done—that body must be concealed where no prying eyes could find it, and so that he who hid it could never be forced to bear the blame.



"If the poor wretch were discovered, it did not matter, thought I—no one would know him. Even if it was found who he was, it did not matter ; for, I tell you, I felt no compunction, and I told myself that in time you would get over the shock and might be happy after all ; for I said that you would have no greater cause for self-reproach than the soldier who slays an enemy to save his own life.

"What, then, could I do ? Get the poor wretch carried down to a cab, have him borne to a hospital, and escape in the bustle of the ambulance being brought to him ?

"That meant discovery, I felt sure. And I thought of the streets by night. In all probability, no one had seen him come up to the chambers ; but I was damped directly there ; for those who carried the man down would be able to tell whence he came, and hundreds would be glad to play the amateur detective and hunt me down.

"On all hands I was checked," continued Brettison, "and I could not help thinking, as I found myself hedged in by obstacles, how much safer we all are in London than we think. The difficulty seemed to increase, and at last I began to recall the story in the 'Arabian Nights' about the man choking himself to death with a bone, and the trouble his host had to dispose of the body. You remember about how they propped it up against another man's door, so that he knocked it down and imagined that he had killed the intruder. I fancied myself carrying the man into the streets myself, but I did not."

Brettison said all this in so careless and jaunty a manner, that Stratton raised his head and gazed at him in horror and disgust. For how could he treat so terrible an event so lightly, and discourse of all his thoughts as they came to him with the body lying on the rug just at his feet.

Stratton's look had its effect, for Brettison became a little uneasy.

"Ah, I see you are shocked at my way of treating the



matter. Well, I suppose I am wrong. It is all fresh and terrible to you ; it has no repulsion for me now. I am only able to look back upon it all as a curious experience of life—a singular turn of the wheel—by which I, a retiring, simple-minded botanist, whose greatest excitement was the discovery of a fresh herb or plant new to England, suddenly found himself playing the part of accomplice to one who had taken another's life."

"Accomplice?" faltered Stratton.

"Of course. The law would treat me as being so. Was I not trying to dispose of the body of the victim so as to screen you from discovery? Oh, yes ; an accomplice. Yes, I argued to myself that the man died by his own hand, and that I was working for your happiness."

"For Heaven's sake, Brettison, don't talk like this!" cried Stratton, almost fiercely. "It is too horrible!"

"You think so," said the old man, with a faint smile of amusement. "Ah, well! we view these things from different points."

"Tell me at once what you did—with it."

"Let me tell you my own way. Old men are tedious, Stratton, and I am, I suppose, no exception to the rule. However, I will be brief, for I am torturing you, I fear. I racked my brains for hours and evoked dozens of plans, but there was always some terrible obstacle in the way, and at last I sat back here in utter despair, seeing nothing but the plain fact before me—that your wisdom was greater than mine, and that the only way out of the difficulty was the one you had chosen—to restore the body to the hiding-place in there.

"It was miserably humiliating, but I could do no more. It was madness to keep the poor wretch where I had laid him ; discovery might come at any time. Once I thought of leaving him there and going away myself—disappearing, as it were, from the world. I could keep my chambers



untouched for months—perhaps years—by sending a check to the agent from time to time. But I knew that this must end in discovery. An unforeseen event might result in the chambers being opened and searched, and, in all probability, the dead might take revenge and prove our betrayer—you, as a naturalist, know how.

“I gave that up, then, like the rest, and, in utter despair, began to unfasten the door again, drew it open, listened, and all was still. You and Guest were, in all probability, asleep.

“Going back to the hearthrug, sick and in disgust, I stooped down to reverse my repulsive task, when, as I touched the body and half raised his head and shoulders from the floor, like a flash of lightning, the way out of the difficulty came. Then, overcome by my emotion, I literally reeled into my bedroom like a drunken man, and dropped upon my knees by my pillow in the thankfulness of my heart, though it was long before I could utter other words than—‘Heaven, I thank thee! My poor lad is saved.’”



## CHAPTER XLIV.

### THE REVELATION CONTINUED—A LIGHTNING STROKE.

THE moment before these last words escaped from Brettison's lips Stratton had been sitting there with his elbows on the table, his face worn, haggard, and full of horror and disgust ; but now the interest in his old friend's statement returned, and he watched him eagerly. The explanation was coming at last. The half-cynical, indifferent manner, too, had passed away, as he continued :

"I came back to this very chair, Stratton, trembling and agitated as I had never been before, to stoop down at once, and then go upon one knee there—there on the rug. His head was just there, boy, and his face a little on one side, so that the profile of the vile scoundrel stood out, clearly cut, against the background of dark chocolate wood."

Brettison's manner was now excited, his words low and hoarse, and his manner had proved contagious ; for Stratton's lips parted, and he leaned over toward the speaker.

"For a few minutes I could do no more," continued Brettison. "A horrible dread assailed me—that I had been deceived—that the door I had, in imagination, seen open before me had closed again, and that I was once more shut in with the terrible difficulty. But, nerving myself again, I passed one arm beneath the shoulders as before, raised him a little, and once more there was a low moan."

"What ?" cried Stratton wildly, as he started from his seat.

"Wait patiently, and you shall hear," said Brettison ; then, drawing a panting breath, as if the effort of recalling



the terrible scene, with its excitement, was almost more than he could bear, he went on :

“ I lowered him again, not daring to think that he was alive, knowing that the sound might have been caused by the escape of a little air from the cavity of the chest. For a few minutes I was sure that this was so, and my hopes were all dashed again. People have called me a learned man, Malcolm ; but, before a difficulty like that, I was a poor, helpless, ignorant child.

“ Mastering myself, though, at last, I thrust my hand into his breast ; but I could feel nothing. I fancied there was a pulsation, but could not tell but that it might be caused by my own throbbing arteries. I tried the wrists, and then, tearing open the collar of his shirt, thrust my hand in there, and the pulsation was plain now. More, I distinctly felt a throb, as a low moan once more escaped from the man's lips.”

“ Not dead ? ” gasped Stratton. “ Her husband ! Living ? Great Heavens ! ”

He sank back into his chair, staring wildly ; and then, in a hoarse whisper :

“ Go on ! ” he panted, “ go on ! ”

“ The way of escape was open widely now,” cried Brettison, reaching over to clutch his companion's wrist, “ and I could see my way clearly. It was madness to attempt to move the body of a dead man through the streets, boy—detection was certain ; but to take a sick or injured man from one place to another was simplicity itself, and I breathed freely. I could act.”

“ Not dead—not dead ! ” muttered Stratton, who looked as if he had received some terrible mental blow, which had confused his faculties and made the effort of following his old friend's narrative almost beyond his powers.

“ I closed that door at once, in dread now lest the moans should have been heard ; and, able to grasp the position, I



could work coolly enough. Going down on my knees with sponge and basin, I soon found that there was a small orifice behind the right ear. This had bled freely, but it had ceased ; and, grasping at once that the bullet had gone upward, I examined next to find its place of exit.

“There was none. The bullet was, in all probability, still in the head.

“He moaned a little as I bathed away all traces of the injury ; and when I had done, save that tiny orifice just behind the ear, there was nothing to show that he was not sleeping, for the face was quite composed.

“What to do next ? Not a moment, I felt, must be lost, if I wished to save his life ; and, with a feeling of grim cynicism, I asked myself whether I did. For I was in a dilemma. On the one hand, if I saved him, it cleared you from what might devolve into a charge of murder ; on the other hand, if I let him die, Myra would be free, and some day——”

“No, no, impossible !” groaned Stratton. “Go on.”

“I could not decide what I ought to do at first, for—I confess it—I was dragged both ways ; but I took the right road, Stratton.

“It was late, but it was a case of emergency, and the man’s face helped me to the tale I meant to tell. There was the swollen nose and there were the pimply blotches of the man who drank. That was sufficient for me ; and, with a strength of which I did not believe myself capable, I dragged him by the shoulders into my bedroom and locked him in. Then, taking my hat, I made my way out unseen, took a cab, and had myself driven to the house of an old servant, who was a pensioner of mine in South London. She was just about to retire for the night, but readily made preparations for the reception of an unfortunate friend of mine who had met with an accident, while I hurried back, discharged my cab, took a fresh one—the man, for ample



pay, being willing enough to undertake my task, and soon found for me a strong helper.

“The rest was easy. I lied to them, and, on taking the man up with me, left him in my room, while I went into the chamber, trembling lest I should find our enemy was dead.

“But he was lying back as I had left him, on a lounge, and I returned to the fellow I had brought up. I gave the man brandy, took a glass myself, and, before utilizing the help I had brought, purposely sprinkled the wounded man with spirit—a hint being sufficient to direct the helper’s thoughts into the channel that this person he was to help to the cab was a victim to *delirium tremens*, for the face was evidence enough.

“My new companion was to have a sovereign for his pains, so he found no cause to object; and when I offered to help laughingly put me aside.

“‘Oh, I can carry him,’ he said, ‘like a baby.’

“A bold, indifferent manner was all, I felt, that was necessary; and fortune favored me, for we did not pass a soul, and the placing of an apparently tipsy man in a four-wheel cab was not novelty enough to excite the interest of passers-by. I was quite right, I tell you; a bold, careless front carried all before it, and in a very few minutes I had left my chambers locked up, the helper was on the box seat, and we were rolled over Blackfriars Bridge to my old servant’s house.

“Here he was carried in, and old Mary shook her head at the scent of the spirits, but assisted willingly till my charge was laid upon the bed, the cabman and his companion dismissed, and then the doctor was fetched.”

“Hah!” ejaculated Stratton, as he wiped the great drops of sweat from his brow.

“You are faint,” said Brettison anxiously.

“Sick almost unto death,” said Stratton hoarsely.



The old man rose and crossed to an old brass-bound cellarette, which he opened.

"No, no," cried Stratton excitedly ; "go on, man, go on. You are torturing me. Let me know the worst—or the best," he cried with a bitter laugh. "Ought I to wish his life to be saved, and, know that I am not a murderer ?"

"A man is no murderer who slays another in defense of his own life," said Brettison calmly, getting out an old spirit decanter and glasses.

"Leave that," cried Stratton, pushing away the glass his friend placed before him. "Go on—go on !"

"No," said Brettison sternly ; "you need the stimulus now."

"Man, have you no feeling for me at such an anguish point as this ?"

"Man, have you no feeling for one who is old and infirm, and who has shortened his poor share of life in his efforts to save you from the misery of your lot ?"

"Forgive me," groaned Stratton. "I am not what I was, Brettison."

"No man could go through such a crucial passage in his life and come out the same," was the quiet reply. "There, drink that. I do not indulge in these things, as you know ; but I am faint, and it is hard work to collect one's thoughts."

He poured out two little glasses of the contents of the old decanter, and drank one—Stratton, whose temples were throbbing, and whose hand trembled in a palsied way, following his example.

"Now," he said, "go on. I am in misery."

"You must know all. I must tell it in my own way, for my mind is confused all through with doubts as to whether I was right in keeping you in ignorance of all this. I did not see it before ; I do see it now."

He looked upon Stratton's worn and aged face with a look full of pity and compunction.



"I acted for the best, my boy," he said—"I acted for the best ; but I feel that I have been, in my zeal, half mad. Still at such a time a man cannot be cool-blooded, and act as he would after longer thought."

Then, as he saw Stratton's hands raised :

"The doctor came, saw the patient, and made his examination carefully, ending by applying proper bandages to the wound, while Barron lay perfectly insensible, only uttering a low moan now and then, as if he felt pain when touched ; otherwise he lay quite calmly, as if asleep.

"And as the doctor busied himself he asked no questions ; but, as if he were influenced by my thoughts as I stood by him, watching him and waiting to give him a garbled—there, a lying—version of the incident, he at last took the very view as I wished to convey it to him by words.

" ' A bad case, sir,' he said at last. ' I can do no more now. The bullet is evidently deeply imbedded. I will not take the risk of probing for it. Shall I get one of our eminent specialists in consultation ? ' "

"I shook my head.

" ' Fatal ? ' I said at last.

"He shrugged his shoulders.

" ' Must speak plainly, sir,' he said. ' It is of no use to talk of hope to a man when one feels that there can be none. Poor fellow, his face tells the tale plainly enough. Drink. Stimulus after stimulus till the brandy, or whatever it is, ceases to have its effect. I knew one poor fellow who used to heat brandy over a spirit lamp to make its effect more rapid. Yes, ceases to have its effect, and more is used. Then the digestive powers break down, the over-goaded brain leaps from its bounds, and we have the delirium that ends in men feeling that life is not worth living, and makes them suicidal like this.' "

"You remember the very words ?" said Stratton, looking at his friend wonderingly.



“Word for word,” said Brettison slowly, “and always shall. I remember, too, the thrill of horror that ran through my nerves as he stood for a few moments with his back to me, between me and the bed, bending first over his patient, and then straightening himself up and raising one arm—his right—with the fist clenched, all but the index finger, which he passed over his shoulder to touch, with the point of the finger, the spot behind his own ear where the bullet had entered.

“For a few moments I did not understand his gesture; then I grasped the fact, and followed his thoughts. He was, in imagination, holding a pistol to his head as he thought his patient must have held it when the trigger was drawn. He had completely taken my view that I wished to impart, and he was thinking of the inquest and the evidence he would have to give.”

Stratton looked at him for a few moments with dilated eyes.

At last he spoke, for Brettison had become wrapped in thought, and sat gazing before him, as if seeing the whole horror once again.

“And did he,” said Stratton, in broken words, “attend him—to the end; did he say—at the inquest—that it was suicide?”

“No,” said Brettison, looking up with a start from his musings, and watching the effect of his words on his companion; “he tended him, but James Dale, or Barron, did not die. He is living now.”



## CHAPTER XLV.

### BRETTISON IS MYSTERIOUS.

“JAMES BARRON living now?” cried Stratton excitedly.  
“Thank Heaven!”

But as the words left his lips his whole manner changed. His face had lighted up at Brettison’s announcement, for the knowledge that he was not answerable for the convict’s death—that he had not slain the husband of the woman he loved—was a tremendous weight, which had crushed him down, suddenly removed; but, like a sudden, scathing flash, came the horror of Myra’s position once more.

There was no selfishness in the feeling; his thoughts were solely of and for her. That man still lived, and she was his wife—tied to an escaped convict, and at his mercy, unless Brettison had done his duty and handed him over to the authorities. But with his sympathetic feeling for her, there came over him a sense of overwhelming despair at his own helpless position.

He passed his hand across his eyes, threw up his head, and seemed more like the old Malcolm Stratton, as he held out his hand to his friend, took that which was eagerly extended to him, and the two men sat, hand grasped in hand, silently for the space of some minutes.

Brettison was the first to speak.

“Then you think, in spite of all, I did wisely?”

“I think you saved that man’s life,” said Stratton with a faint, sad smile upon his lip. “But for you I must have gone to the grave with that knowledge always on my brain. You have spared me that. I can sleep without waking to think of that man’s blood being on my hands.”



"And there is hope for you yet," whispered Brettison earnestly.

"Where?" said Stratton mournfully. "In the other world?"

"Bah! Despairing at your age? Why, man, this life is full of change and surprise. Nothing comes to pass so often as the unexpected."

Stratton shook his head.

"What! Doubting, in the face of all I have told you just now? Why, man, my news must have come upon you like a miracle. Come, I shall see you and Myra happy yet."

"Silence!" cried Stratton sternly. "Impossible! All that is past. Brettison, I accept my fate in all thankfulness for what I know. If Myra and I ever meet again, I can take her hand and look her calmly in the eyes. I know my position now; and, thank God, I am once more a man—free from the great horror of my life. Now, tell me. The man recovered from his wound?"

"Yes," said Brettison, looking at Stratton curiously, "he is quite recovered from that; only much changed."

"You have seen him lately, then?" cried Stratton eagerly.

"Yes; not many hours since."

"Brettison!"

"Yes? Why do you start like that?"

"Then you have not handed him over to the authorities?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Man, you ask me that? You leave him free to go yonder and make her life a burden?"

"I did not say so," replied Brettison calmly. "Suppose I had handed the man over to the authorities, what then? The news would have been in every paper of the convict's marvelous escape from death. Pleasant reading for the



Bourne Square breakfast table. Surely that poor girl has suffered enough?"

Stratton gazed at him wildly.

"I thought it all out, and I said to myself: 'James Dale, or Barron, died that night to the world, when he escaped from the convict prison. Why should I bring him to life? For everyone's sake, let him be dead still.'"

"Impossible!" cried Stratton. "The man will take advantage of his freedom, and Myra's position must become intolerable. You have done wrong, sir. He must be given up at once."

"But the knowledge of what has passed must reach Myra's ears, and the pain and agony of spirit it will cause will be more than she can bear."

Stratton groaned.

"And don't you see you are cutting the last piece of ground from beneath your feet—letting yourself sink at once into a slough of despond?"

"Don't tempt me, man!" cried Stratton angrily. "Heaven knows how weak I am, and how gladly I would fall in with your ideas, but they are impossible. You must be mad to propose them."

"Perhaps so," said Brettison. "I often think I must be a little wanting, now. But, Malcolm, my boy, think of yourself. If Myra knows that this man is still living, she will never see you again."

"Never," said Stratton firmly; "but she will get to know the reason of my conduct on that day, and I shall be forgiven for playing the part I did. She will know all this and forgive me. That is my reward. I tell you, I accept my position. James Barron must be given up."

"You are determined upon that?"

"Yes. It was my decision that morning before the struggle. It was the only course for an honorable man. What was right then must be doubly right now. If Myra



were here, she would bid me act as I propose, even if it broke her heart."

"Even if it broke her heart," said Brettison thoughtfully. "I'm afraid I should sin deeply sooner than let her break her heart."

"Brettison!" cried Stratton; "is my old friend to become my tempter now at another crisis in my life? But you do not mean it. You are trying me. Come, I have been tried enough. You seem to have given me a new lease of life. Let us have no more trifling with duty; we have both suffered enough. Tell me, where is this man?"

Brettison was silent for a few moments, and then looked up quietly.

"I will tell you soon. First of all, you are judging too hastily."

"No; I am saying what is right."

"Under certain circumstances; but you do not know all yet."

"What! Have you kept something back?"

"Yes."

"First, tell me where is this man. He has been in your charge ever since his recovery."

"From the wound? Yes."

"And he submits to your dictation—to your rule?"

"Yes."

"Because he fears that you will give him up?"

"No; he does not fear that. But listen to me; you shall not judge too hastily. Wait till you know all my reasons."

"Tell me them."

"Not now."

"When, then?"

"After you have seen James Barron."

"Seen him? Meet that man again?" cried Stratton, with a look of horror.



“ Yes.”

“ Impossible ! ”

“ No ; it is my wish—my prayer. Come with me and see him. Then you shall decide what should be done ; and I give you my word that I will follow out your wishes to the letter.”

“ You promise that ? ”

Brettison gave him his hand in token of his promise, and Stratton stood thinking for a moment or two.

“ Yes,” he said then, “ I have no cause to fear. It is cowardly to refuse. When shall the meeting be ? ”

“ To-morrow.”



## CHAPTER XLVI.

### A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

LAND was not so valuable when Queen Charlotte's Road was built, and people who directed letters to their friends in that locality did not then place the letters "S. E." at the bottom of the address. In fact, so low in price was the land that the speculative builder of that day—whose name, by the way, was not Jeremiah, or Jerry, for the houses are still standing—gave to each of the double-barreled, or semi-detached cottages, a goodly piece of garden back and front ; and, instead of piling up so many rooms by the side of a fire-escape sort of staircase, planted them, for the most part, side by side, and ran a good broad veranda along the front. He or his tenants planted trees as well—trees that once gave the straight broad road which ran down to the strawberry and rhubarb fields quite a countrified air.

The houses are there still, but many of them have been found substantial enough to bear a couple of floors on the top of the old structure ; and some of the trees are still in their old places—vigorous old fellows of artful nature, who declined to trust their roots where they would be poisoned by the company's gas mains or cut off by the picks and shovels of the navvies at work on the main drainage scheme. Consequently, they lived, though in a sad, decrepit, mutilated way ; bent back, beheaded, carved and cropped—limbless dwarfs, for the most part, but always ready to put forth plenty of tender, green leaves in the spring-time, and to make a litter of the dead early in the autumn, while the country trees were still in full costume.



The road—which ran at right angles out of what was once a highly respectable retired-tradesman thoroughfare, with gardens rich in lilac and laburnum, now all busy shops—no longer lost itself in rhubarb gardens, but was carried on through miles of crowded streets; and it was through these, by an ingenious short cut and long fare process, that a hansom cab was being driven, till Queen Charlotte's Road was reached, and a signal given for the man to stop by a semaphore use of Brettison's gouty umbrella.

Stratton gazed wonderingly at the neat, green-verandaed cottage, half-hidden by the cropped trees and a well kept privet hedge, and noted as they entered the gate that there was a cane armchair just outside the French window, sheltered by the broad veranda, and that there were many wheel-marks on the gravel, suggestive of perambulators and children; but, in its well painted, clean windows, carefully tended garden, and general aspect of comfort, the place was anything but that where Stratton had expected to find an escaped convict confined.

Hardly a word had been said during the drive out, but Stratton had quite made up his mind what to do. He felt that he would be running counter to his friend's wishes, and might seem unmerciful, but at the cost of any suffering to Myra he felt that it was the best thing, and would result in saving her future cares.

They were met at the door by the comely looking gray-haired woman who had played the part of nurse, and she drew back, smiling, to show them into a cheerful sitting room, well furnished, with a canary on one side of the window and a particularly sage-looking starling in a wicker cage on the other.

"Ah, Dick!" said Brettison, rubbing his finger along the sides of the canary's cage. "Well, Jack!"

The yellow bird burst into song, and the speckled star-



ling uttered a sharp, jarring sound, and set up all its sharp-pointed, prickly looking plumes till it resembled a feathered porcupine.

“Not such an uncomfortable place for a man to live in, eh?” said Brettison cheerily. “Better than our dull, dusty chambers, eh?”

Stratton's eyes were wandering about, noting a clay tobacco pipe on the hob, a jar on the table, and an easy-chair and spittoon by the fireplace, while flowers were in a vase on the table, and a couple of solemn looking, swollen-eyed, pompous goldfish sailed round and round their little crystal globe, as if it were their world, and nothing outside were of the least consequence, unless it might have been the fat cat, with fishhook claws, half asleep where the sun made a patch on the stone outside the French window.

“Like this place better than the old street, eh, Mary?” said Brettison.

“Oh, indeed yes, sir! It's quite like being in the country, and yet with all the advantages of town.”

“As the house agent said in his advertisement, eh? Well, where is Mr. Cousin?”

“Only gone to get his morning shave, sir. He'll be back soon.”

“Humph! Pretty well?”

“Oh, yes, sir; he's nicely, thank you. Really, sir, I don't think he wants the chair at all. It's only because he likes it and has grown used to it.”

“Yes, yes; I suppose so. Creatures of habit, Mary. Want any money—any rates or taxes due? Coal cellar all right—want another ton?”

“Oh, no, sir, thank you. I haven't near got through the last money yet.”

“Mary, you're a paragon of economy,” said Brettison. “There, that will do now. I'll sit down and have a chat with my friend till he comes back.”



There was a smile and a courtesy, and the woman withdrew.

"Sit down, my dear boy. No use to make a labor of our task. Not bad quarters, eh? Not to be changed lightly for the locks and bars of The Foreland, eh?"

Stratton looked at him reproachfully.

"Are you not taking all this too lightly?" he said.

"Oh, I hope not. But we shall see. I'm afraid that I should never have done for a judge, Malcolm. I should have let all the prisoners off with light sentences. Ah, here he comes!"

For there was the sound of wheels, a faint creaking, and from where Stratton sat, with his back to the window, he could hear the brushing of a light vehicle against the shrubs, as it was evidently being pushed up to the side door.

Stratton's first impulse was to turn round and gaze out at the man he had come to see, but he mastered his desire and sat up rigidly, with his eyes fixed upon the door, and the scenes of the past flitting before him in a rapid sequence. Now he was listening to the flushed, coarse looking, brutalized scoundrel, boasting of his position and power to wreck the future of a beautiful, innocent woman; then they were talking fiercely together, and there was the struggle. And, again, that horrible scene—with the smoke gradually spreading through the room, while Barron lay prone upon the carpet, with a little thread of blood slowly trickling down from behind his ear. This gave place, as there was a rustling in the entry, to a picture of the moments when there was another terrible rustling as he dragged the body into the bath closet and strove so hard to hide all traces of the catastrophe.

Then the door slowly opened, there was the thumping of a couple of sticks, and, in utter astonishment, Stratton was gazing at a gray-haired, cleanly shaven, heavy looking man,



whose pallid face had a peculiar, inanimate aspect, and who came in, making no sign of recognition, but walked slowly across the room to the easy-chair by the fireside. He stood his two crutch-handled sticks by the mantelpiece, and subsided into the chair with a sigh of content, and began passing his hand over his smoothly shaven face, as if in search of stubble that the razor had missed.

Stratton was astounded. He had expected an angry start as a precursor to a fierce scene between them ; but the man paid not the slightest heed to either of the visitors. There was a dreamy look in his lackluster eyes, and his heavy lips moved slightly, as if he were whispering to himself.

The man seemed to be imbecile, and Stratton grasped now his friend's object in bringing them face to face. It was to show him how little so mindless a creature ought to influence the future of two people's lives, and to consult with him as to what ought to be done.

Brettison watched his friend closely to see what effect the meeting had upon him, but directly after he was as keenly noting every movement and look of James Barron, to see if there was the slightest shade of recognition.

At last, apparently satisfied, he said aloud :

“ Well, Mr. Cousin, been for your morning visit ? ”

Barron seemed as if an appeal to his ear was the way to attract his attention, and not to the eyes ; for he looked up with a slight display of animation, and he nodded.

“ Yes,” he said, “ been to get shaved—been to get shaved.”

He reached over to the fireplace and took the pipe, tapped it slowly on the hob, sat back, passed his hand over his face again in search of the stubble, and then leaned forward to get the jar from the table ; after which he began to fill his pipe by pinching out a sufficient quantity from the jar, placing it in his left palm ; and applying



the opening of the bowl thereto, worked it round and round till the whole of the tobacco had been worked in, when, after a finishing pressure with one finger, he took a match-box from his pocket and began to smoke in placid content.

Brettison still watched his friend intently, to see the effect of all this upon him ; and after a quick and meaning glance, he turned to Barron.

"Tobacco good ?" he said,

"Tobacco? Yes, capital tobacco. Have a pipe ?"

"Not now. I've brought a friend to see you."

"Friend? Where is he?" said Barron, peering round through the smoke. "Ho, there! How do—how do? Have a pipe?"

Stratton made no reply, but gazed at the man in horror.

"Never been shot, I suppose?" said Barron suddenly.

Stratton started as if he had been stung.

"No, no," said Brettison hastily. "My friend has never been shot."

"Ho! pity. Can't grasp it, then. You've never been shot either, but you do. Wonderful case mine, eh?"

"Yes, very," said Brettison.

"Can't find the bullet, you know. Big bullet shot me; I want it to have it set for my watch chain—I say."

"Yes."

"Doctor's very proud of me, eh!"

"Yes; he considers yours a wonderful case."

"Yes; wonderful case."

"How did it happen?" said Brettison, with a glance at his friend.

"Happen? Ah! I can't find out how it happened. Must have been before I was born."

This last in a very thoughtful tone; and then, more loudly:

"Of course, if it had happened since, I should have known, eh?"



"Very probably," said Brettison.

"I often try to think about it; but it don't matter. I say."

"Yes."

"Doctor's very proud of my case, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes, very."

"Don't think he has stolen the bullet, do you?"

"Oh, no, no; not likely."

"No, of course not," said Barron thoughtfully, as he sank back in his chair and went on smoking.

Brettison spoke to him again and again, but his words had not the slightest effect; the man seemed perfectly unconscious of all that was said, and at last there was a tap at the door, and the nurse entered with a tray, and a little tureen of beef tea, with thin slices of toast.

"He always has this, sir, about this time," said the nurse apologetically, "and the doctor said that it must be given regularly."

"Quite right, Mary. Of course."

"He has been talking a little, sir?"

"Oh, yes, for a time, and then he finished; and we have not had a word since."

"No, sir, and you would not till to-morrow now, when he'll wake up a little again, and talk about what a wonderful case his is."

"Poor fellow!" said Brettison compassionately.

"And he always seems to have got that bullet on his brain, sir."

"Naturally," muttered Brettison.

"And, if you'll believe me, sir, if he didn't ask me to confess yesterday that I'd stolen it to show to people, because his was such a curious case."

Stratton glanced at the man seated there, still smoking placidly, and evidently not grasping a word that was said.

The tray was taken to him, and he submitted to the



pipe being removed from his hand, after which, in perfect silence, and in the most mechanical manner, he went on with his meal, while, after a few more words with the nurse, Brettison led the way out into the road, and he and Stratton went back toward the West End.

"Now," said Brettison at last, "you have seen our deadly enemy—the being who crushes down the future of two people I love. What do you say?"

Stratton was silent for a few moments.

"Will he recover?" he said at last.

"Not in this world. The bullet lodged somewhere about the brain, and it has produced, by its pressure, this peculiar form of imbecility. The past is an utter blank to him, and it is only for a short time every morning that he has the power of expressing himself at all."

"You feel certain that he will not recover?"

"I have had the opinions of two of our most famous specialists, and they say it is impossible. The man is, to all intents and purposes, mentally dead. Now, then, as an enemy, Myra has no cause to fear him."

"None."

"He can never trouble you or her for blackmail, even if he had dared, after what has passed; so I think he may be left out of the question altogether. You will not, I am sure, think of handing the man over to the police."

Stratton was silent for a few moments.

"No," he said at last; "it is impossible."

"I thought you would feel like this," said Brettison. "Let the poor wretch end his days in peace."

"At your cost?" said Stratton sharply.

"Oh, pooh! A mere nothing, my dear boy," cried Brettison; "and I am not poor."

"I cannot allow that," said Stratton, after a few moments' thought; "and we must do something else. There should be no risk of those two ever coming face to face again."



"Well, is it likely? West End and East End do not often mix."

"No, but there is always the possibility. An accident might bring Myra to some spot where he had been taken. Who can guard against such things?"

"None of us; but I thought I had taken precautions enough."

"But we must take the greatest," said Stratton excitedly.

"What would you do?"

Stratton made no reply, and seemed so plunged in thought that Brettison respected his silence, and they rode back together, with the old man's face lighting up as he felt more at rest and satisfied with the way in which matters had shaped themselves.

They reached the narrow entrance to the inn in due course, and Stratton led the way up into his chambers, closed the door, and pointed to a seat, but kept on pacing the room himself; thoughtful and silent, as if some doubt as to his course were still lingering in his mind.

At last he threw himself into a chair.

"This is neither the time nor place to talk of your devotion to me, Brettison. Heaven reward you for it! You have brought me back to a new, even if hopeless, life. Let us now talk of the future."

"Yes, yes," said Brettison eagerly, for he had grown uneasy at his friend's words.

"There must never be the slightest risk of Myra and that man meeting again. Here in England it would always be possible."

"No, no; don't say you will send the poor wretch back to the prison."

"No; as I have said before, that is out of the question now, but he must leave England."

"Yes; but how?"

"You must help me again, Brettison."



"Of course, boy ; but how ?"

"You are a wanderer ; ready to go anywhere to study plant life ?"

"Yes."

"Then you must select some place to begin with and settle there for a time—say in Brittany, inland or on the coast. Let that man be with you, and his nurse, and always under your eye."

"Willingly."

"When tired of one place go to another ; but he must not be left."

"I'll do it," said Brettison eagerly.

"I knew you would. But listen ; I shall share your task. I'll give up everything to guard against that horror. Will you help me ?"

"My boy, I tell you, yes ; and gladly, too, now that this black shadow is being swept from your life."

"Thank you, Brettison. We will start to-morrow, if possible ; if not, as soon as it is."

"Good. He will be no trouble, and it will be like old times again, Malcolm. Bless you, my boy ! It gives me life to see you growing firm and like yourself again. Who's that ?"

He started as he stood up and clasped Stratton's hand, for there was a sharp double knock at the outer door.

"Guest," said Stratton. "There, our plans are made. They are for ourselves alone I trust Guest, but not yet with this."

He threw open the inner door, and unfastened the outer, which was drawn from his hand, and the man regarding whom they had been planning, looking intent and strange, strode into the room.

"James Barron !"

"Yes ; I have business with you, sir," he said, in quite his old tone. "Mr. Malcolm Stratton, I believe ?"



## CHAPTER XLVII.

### FLASHING BACK TO LIFE.

BRETTISON leaped from his chair, and Stratton literally staggered back against a glass case so violently that a figure upon it toppled over and fell with a crash, as if emblematic of another downfall of all hope.

For it seemed incredible. Little more than an hour before they had left this man apparently a helpless imbecile, unable to concentrate his mental faculties save upon one point, and only at certain times upon that, at all others hopelessly blank. While now the vacuity had apparently departed, his face looked eager and animated, and the helpless log had turned into a dangerous enemy, whose fresh coming upon the scene completely upset all calculations, and the question staring them in the face was how to act next.

For it was quite plain ; so long as the man had gone on in his quiet, regular track, with his nurse in attendance, and his invalid-chair waiting to take him a short distance every morning, his mind had remained blank ; but though he had made no sign—though he had apparently not been in any way impressed by Stratton's company—beneath the calm, dreamy surface the old man had been evoked, the thoughts lying dormant had suddenly been awakened ; and with the last scene of which he was conscious, before the shot had prostrated body and mind at one blow, once more vividly before his mind, he had risen from his seat during his nurse's absence, and made straight for the chambers, bent upon finishing the task upon which he had set his mind.



As he mounted the stairs, nearly everything was as clear as on the day when he had presented himself. Only one matter was confused, and, strangely enough, that was the point upon which, during his imbecile condition, he had been able to dwell—to wit, his wound. One set of ideas swept away the other, and he could only go back to the moment when he had presented that revolver at Stratton.

And now, as he entered the room and spoke, it was to him the same day and the continuation of his interview with Stratton. It puzzled him a little that he should have had to come through the streets to continue that scene, but not much, for his mind had been gradually opening out from the time he left Queen Charlotte Road, and it was only when he reached Stratton's door that he had gained its full expansion. He was a little surprised, too, at seeing Brettison there. The latter had come in suddenly like one in a dream, but he did not let it trouble him. If Stratton was willing to let a third person share the secret, that was his lookout. Brettison was evidently not connected with the police, and he felt that the power he held made him more than a match for both.

He smiled as he saw the effect his arrival had produced on the occupants of the chambers, and looked sharply from one to the other before turning, and turning the bolt of the inner door into its socket. Then his hand went suspiciously to his pocket and then to his breast. Not finding what he sought, he looked at the table and the floor in search of it.

He shook his head then as if to clear his mind, and turned to Brettison.

"Who are you?" he said sharply. "Friend of his—a friend of the lady? Why have you come? Don't matter. If he doesn't mind, it's nothing to me. Get the old man and the aunt, and my wife too, if you like, for she is my wife, mind. You can't get out of that—my wife, Mrs.



James Barron. Do you hear, Stratton?—Mrs. James Barron.”

Stratton uttered a peculiar sound, between a groan and a cry of rage, and he took a step toward the man, who drew himself up threateningly.

“No nonsense,” he said, with a fierce snarl. “No games, or you’ll repent it. I’m playing high, and I’ll stand no humbug. Look here, old man,” he continued, turning to Brettison, “you sit down there, whoever you are. I don’t want to hurt you. I warn you, for I may turn rusty. What you’ve got to do is to take a sensible view of the case, and advise him to do the same. Sit down.”

He spoke as fiercely as if it were to an obstinate dog, and Brettison sank back in an easy-chair, looking stunned.

“That’s right. Now you, Stratton, you’d better squat down, too. I’ve come on particular business. I expected you to turn nasty, and I’m quite prepared.”

He tapped his breast where he had felt for the revolver, and a look of low cunning crossed his heavy face.

Stratton also sank into a chair—not so much in obedience to the man’s words as to gain time and settle upon some plan of action.

“Come, that’s sensible,” said the man, smiling. “I see we shall come to good terms suitable to all parties. I hate quarreling, specially when all the good cards are in my hand. It’s like being forced to take a cowardly advantage of the other side.”

Brettison turned a hopeless look upon Stratton, and the man saw it and said sharply :

“Never mind him. I’ll tell you, as you were not here. I propose a handsome sum down. Hallo ! he has pocketed those notes that were on the table. But it doesn’t matter, they’re easily brought out. A handsome sum down, and a regular quarterly payment. He has only to agree to that,



and James Barron goes about in the dark and he never sees him. It'll be just as if James Barron was shot and drowned, as the papers said, in an attempt to escape off The Foreland one dark night about a year ago. Ugh! it was rough work," he added, with a shudder, "and I deserve a little extra for leaving the lady alone for so long. Now, then, isn't that a fair offer?"

Brettison's lips moved as he sat there perfectly prostrated, wishing that in his zeal he had not interfered; for had he not, the man before them would have been dead and powerless to work all this evil—unless discovery had made him a more deadly enemy still.

"I say, isn't that a fair offer?" he repeated. "Silence gives consent. There we are, then. Come, Stratton. They must be ready to start for the church by this time, so look alive and let's get the business done. Just a few strokes of the pen, the handing over of some filthy lucre in the shape of notes—Bank of England, mind," he said with a peculiar laugh, "none of your Russian rubles. By jingo, what notes those were, though. They didn't find 'em out for years. Well?"

He looked from one to the other as they sat watching him in helpless dismay.

"Come; don't fool. You are keeping the lady waiting, and old Jerrold is a regular Tartar, I can tell you. He will not stand any nonsense. I know him of old. Come, what is it to be?"

He looked fixedly at Stratton, as if urging him to speak, but no words came.

"I say, what is it to be?" cried the man fiercely. "No shilly-shally! Don't put me out, or I shall be more nasty than you like. There, there, don't let's quarrel, gentlemen," he cried, changing his tone. "We're all men of the world, and we've got to deal with an ugly difficulty. Let's settle it sensibly. I'm sorry for you, Stratton. It's disap-



pointing for you to have a dead man come to life and claim his wife just as you are going to take the pretty widow to the church ; but these accidents will occur, and when they do let's repair damages the best way we can. Well ; why don't you speak ; don't let me do all the talking."

Stratton drew a deep breath.

"Oh, it's of no use to sigh over it, sir, not a bit. Nothing to sigh for. Come, hang it all, Myra Barron's worth a few hundreds down, and a little income for her lawful lord. I don't want her, but I can't afford to sell her too cheaply—hang the thing !"

He gave his head an uneasy jerk, and his hand played about his neck and the back of his right ear for a few moments, as if something troubled him. But it passed off directly, and he looked from one to the other again as he took a chair, turned it, and supported himself by propping himself with the back.

"Now then : the parson's waiting, and the carriages and the people. Drink my health after its all over, and think to yourself I've behaved like a trump. Write out a check, and send the old man here to cash it, only look here, old fellow, no games, no tricks. You'll play fair—or I shall make it pretty unpleasant for all concerned, I can tell you. All right, you'll be square. You can't afford to play tricks. Now, then, we are agreed, eh ? That's right. Better than having a furious row about nothing. What do you say ?"

"I was about to speak to my friend, sir," said Stratton quietly. Then turning to Brettison—"Now what do you think ; we must completely alter our plans."

"Yes," said Brettison, with a sigh.

"Make your plans, gentleman, when you've settled with me," said the man sternly, and he jerked one hand up to his neck again, and withdrew it with a gesture of annoyance. "Come, Stratton, it's only a few lines written with



a pen, and you win all you want. Where do you keep your check-book? In your table-drawer."

"There is only one way out of the difficulty, Brettison," said Stratton with a sigh.

"Only one," said the old man sadly.

"Bravo, that's common sense," cried the man. "Sound wisdom. I told you so. Out with that check-book at once."

"I'm afraid, sir," said Stratton sternly, "that we are at cross purposes."

"What do you mean?"

"That no money would ever buy your silence, even if I were disposed to play the part of scoundrel. You will get no hush money from me."

"What?"

"There is only one way out of this difficulty."

"Oh, indeed!" said the man sarcastically; "and that is——"

"To hand you over to the police."

"What?"

"You heard my words, sir! I need not repeat them. The prison is the only place for such as you, where the power of doing mischief is beyond you. Brettison, go down and fetch a policeman—two—at once."

"Let him stir, and I'll send a bullet through his skull," cried the man fiercely, as his hand was thrust behind him beneath his coat.

"Go at once, Brettison, I'll take care he does not harm you."

"Don't listen to him, you, sir," cried the scoundrel. "I warn you; you stir from that chair and you're a dead man!"

"My dear Stratton," said Brettison, rising from his seat.

"Go at once! Never mind his threats," said Stratton fiercely.



"All right, I've warned you," said the man, drawing back his lips from his teeth like some wild animal about to bite, and stepping quickly to the door he stood near it with his hand behind him still, as if about to draw a revolver from his hip pocket.

Brettison did not stir.

"He has a pistol there," he whispered.

"Of course. Suppose I was coming on a job like this, to make my gentleman there disgorge, and not have a mate to back me? Now, then, both of you; it's of no use to get into a passion. You threaten police. I checkmate you with the little tool I have here—my reserve force. There, you had better take it quietly, Stratton. What are a few hundreds to you? I give up the girl and her fortune; what more do you want? As for myself, I only wish for enough to live comfortably and in peace without troubling anybody. There, let's talk again like men of the world. You put my back up when you begin talking all that nonsense about the police. Be sensible, Mr. Stratton. I've had one dose of over yonder that was not pleasant. I don't want to get on trial for shooting you—if caught."

He said the last words with a forced laugh, and took a step or two forward in a jaunty fashion, in wonderful contrast with his manner an hour or so before.

"Now, then, Mr. Stratton, we'll forget all that, please. Sit down, as I said before, and write that check."

Stratton stood motionless in the middle of the room, with his eyes fixed upon his visitor; and his strength of mind and determination seemed to grow rapidly. The old nervous horror was gone, and, quite equal to his task, he never for a moment removed his eyes from his adversary.

"Come, we're wasting time, Mr. Stratton. You're wanted yonder. No more shilly-shallying, please; that check."

"Fetch the police, Brettison," said Stratton sternly; and, in obedience to the order, Brettison took a step for-



ward, while the savage aspect came again into the ex-convict's countenance as he took a step back and covered the door.

"No, you don't," he said, making a gesture as if tugging a pistol from his pocket. "I warn you both, I'm a desperate man. I've been skulking about for over a twelve-month now, waiting for my chance, and it's come. I'll have that money before I go. Write out that check, and get it cashed. Send him, I say again, to get the money; and as for you," he snarled, as he turned his eyes on Brettison, "you play any games, you so much as look at a policeman while you are out, and I warn you he'll suffer for it before you can break in here with any of your cursed hounds."

"It's of no use," said Brettison hoarsely. "Let him say how much he wants, and I'll write a check and get the money."

"Hah! That's talking sense," said the man exultantly, but never for a moment relaxing his watchfulness—keeping his eyes upon Stratton, but noting as well Brettison's actions as he took out his pocketbook and drew a blank check from one of the folds.

"How much must I draw this for, Mr. Cousin?" he said hurriedly.

"Cousin? Who's Mr. Cousin? Draw it to James Barron, Esquire. No. What for? Draw it to yourself. Five hundred pounds, now."

Brettison shrugged his shoulders, and moved toward the table.

"Stop!" cried Stratton firmly. "What are you going to do?"

"Give him the money," said Brettison. "You see; we must."

"Fetch the police," repeated Stratton. "I cannot leave you and go myself."



"But the man is armed," said Brettison. "My dear boy, he is desperate."

"I tell you, I will protect you, man. Now, come on."

He took a step forward, and the ex-convict gave a fierce tug to draw his weapon, but stopped, for Brettison seized his friend, and held him back.

"The pistol! Mind!" he cried.

"He has no pistol," roared Stratton, dragging himself free; and, seizing the man by the collar with both hands, he flung him aside. "Now, then, the police at once."

Brettison rushed to the door; but stopped short to gaze in wonder at the group before him.

For as if Stratton's touch had discharged all power from the man he had seized, the fierce look faded from his face, which grew heavy, vacuous, and dull; his legs trembled beneath him, and he lurched forward, and was only saved from falling by a rapid movement on Stratton's part as he swung him into an easy-chair, where his enemy sank back with his head lying over on one shoulder, and his leaden eyes staring heavily at the floor.

The strength which had animated him with the flush of memory which had come back, had passed away, and he was once more the feeble imbecile, slowly raising his hand to his neck, where his fingers wandered about the scar of his wound; while at that moment there was faintly heard on the staircase the cheery humming-over of a scrap from an opera, followed by voices and steps on the stone landing, which halted at the door.

Then came a long, rolling knock, followed by a merry laugh, and Stratton, with a quick movement, raised his hand and whispered:

"Hush!"



## CHAPTER XLVIII.

### TO SAVE HER.

THE knock was repeated as Brettison and Stratton stood gazing at each other, and then at the miserable imbecile before them in the chair.

At that moment a familiar voice, muffled by the doors, but still silvery and clear, said :

“No use ; not at home.”

“One more try !” came plainly to their ears, followed by a cleverly executed *roulade* with the little brass knocker.

Then there was a short pause, and the rattle of the little copper-plate of the letter-box as if something had been dropped in ; the babble of merry voices, and descending steps.

Stratton waited till the last sound had died out, when he opened the inner door, and took out two cards.

“Edie and Guest,” he said, as he came back and re-closed the door.

Just then a line or two in pencil caught his eye, and he read :

“Come on to my rooms as soon as you can. *News.*

“P. G.”

“Impossible ?” muttered Stratton, tossing the cards on to the table. “Now, Brettison, we must act at once.”

“Yes. Yes ; of course. But, my dear lad, what a pity you found me, and I took you there.”

“Too late to talk of that, man,” said Stratton, who was full of energy now as he stood frowning. “But have you ever had any scene like this before ? I mean, has he returned to his former self ?”



"No. He has always been as you saw him this morning. His memory was a blank as to the past. Your coming and the sound of your voice must have revived it all."

"But he made not the faintest sign of recognition."

"No; but we cannot understand the workings of the brain. It was, perhaps, the expiring effort of his reason, for look at him now."

"Expiring!" cried Stratton. "Yes; but how many more flashes of reason may spring up before the light goes right out?"

Brettison gazed at the man in a perplexed way, and bent over and touched him, but there was no sign.

"This settles it," said Stratton at last. "We must act at once."

"Yes. What shall we do?"

"You see, he may have a hundred returns of his memory, and come here again and again threatening and making demands; and if he has reason enough at these times to come here, what is to prevent his going up to the admiral's and making a terrible scene there?"

Brettison nodded.

"Yes," he said hopelessly. "What, indeed! Malcolm, my dear lad. I thought by going into hiding with him, and devoting myself to his care, I was doing you a great service; but I'm getting old and weak, I suppose. I will go by all you say now. I haven't an opinion of my own."

"You did everything you could for me," said Stratton warmly; "and you must go on helping me still."

"I will do anything if you will only trust me."

"Trust you," cried Stratton reproachfully. "There, we must act at once."

"What do you propose doing?"

"Making sure that the man has no further opportunity of doing harm to anyone."

"You will not hand the poor wretch over to the police?"



"No," said Stratton sternly. "I cannot ; he is her husband. That blow must not come from me. Either you or I must always be with him abroad."

"Yes, it would be best. Beyond reach of doing harm. Where shall I take him ?"

"*We* will take him across to France first," said Stratton, emphasizing the first word. "Let's get him to St. Malo, and then along the coast to some secluded fishing village, till we can think out a better plan."

"Good ; and when will you start ?"

"At once—that is, to-night. You could be ready ?"

"A man who can draw a little money is always ready," replied Brettison, smiling. "Then I'll take him back with me in a cab, pack up some things, and you will join us in time to catch the train which meets the Southampton boat this evening."

"No. Leave him with me," said Stratton firmly. "Go and get your luggage ready, and call for me with a cab at nine ; that will be plenty of time for us to catch the train."

"But—er—leave you—with him ?" said Brettison hesitatingly.

Stratton laughed bitterly.

"Don't be afraid, old fellow," he said. "I shall not try to murder him this time."

"My dear Malcolm !" cried the old man reproachfully.

"Well," said Stratton, smiling sadly ; "if you did not exactly think that, you had some hazy notions of its being unsafe to leave me with my incubus."

"I—that is——" faltered Brettison weakly.

"There, say no more. He's safe with me. I shall not try to buy her freedom at such a cost. You know that."

"At nine o'clock, then," said Brettison hastily. "You are sure you will not mind being left with him ?"

"Mind ?" said Stratton with a smile. "Yes, I mind it,



but it is our duty, old fellow ; and we are going to do that duty to the end."

He wrung his old friend's hand as he saw him off, and then, with a complete change coming over his countenance, he carefully locked the door, placed the inner key in his pocket, and walked steadily across to where his unwelcome visitor lay back in his seat, with his hand still playing furtively about the red scar behind his ear. His eyes stared in a leaden way at the rich carpet ; and, as Stratton followed them he shuddered, and the whole scene of that terrible night came back, for the eyes were fixed upon a stain only partly obliterated, and it was there where his head had lain after he received the shot.

A peculiar sense of shrinking ran through Stratton as he saw himself again passing through the struggle and dragging the man into the bath-closet, while once more he had to fight with the feelings of dread of detection, and recalled how he had argued with himself, upon the necessity for hiding away the wretch whose existence had been as a blight on Myra's young life, and who, dead, was the great bar to their future happiness.

"And," he muttered aloud with a bitter sigh, "living—as great a barrier still."

"If he would but die," something seemed to say ; "and free her."

But he shook his head directly.

"A vain hope," he said—"a vain hope."

He shuddered and clenched his hands, closing his eyes directly after, for a maddening, horrible feeling of temptation had come over him. They were alone in that solitary room—he with this wretch whose existence in his sane moments was a curse ; and who now, as he lay back there feeble, vacuous, existing only in body, not in mind, was a mere blot upon the earth, less worthy of the space he occupied than the vilest animal classed as vermin, and which



man crushed out of his way without compunction, without a second thought. What sin would it be to quench the flickering life before him? He must give up all hope of ever clasping Myra to his heart, as he had given it up before, and suffer as he had suffered then; but she would be free. There would never then be any possibility of her coming face to face with this horror. And it would be so easy! One firm grasp of his nervous fingers, and the feeble beating of the miserable wretch's arteries would cease.

And after?

Brettison would return and find that his preparations had been vain—that the man was lying back there in his chair—dead from a fit—the precarious life had come to an end, as might have been foretold after such a seizure—such a stroke. And it would be so easy—so easy.

Stratton opened his eyes and stood gazing down at the vacant face with the lids half-closed now, and remained there as if fascinated, unable to drag himself away till, with one vigorous wrench, he turned and literally rushed into his chamber to prepare for the journey.

He was absent about half an hour before he returned to make a few more preparations there.

He went about the room opening cabinet and case to find money and other necessities for his journey, busying himself, and taking care not to let his eyes rest for a moment on the figure sitting back in the chair and uneasily moving from time to time.

"He is safe with me—safe with me," Stratton muttered as he went to and from his bedroom. "What thoughts will force themselves into a man's head at times!"

The hours had glided by till it had grown quite dark, and still he was busy for the sake of occupying himself. But at last he could see to do no more, and he went softly to a drawer to get out matches and light his lamp.



The drawer creaked as he pulled it out, and deadened a sound behind him as of one softly rising from a chair, and a piece of stone—a large fossil—grated as it was taken from the mantelpiece ; but, rapt in thought, Stratton did not hear it as he opened the box, took out and struck a match, which flashed, and threw a bluish, ghastly light upon a hideous face, with beside it an arm raised to strike.

The next minute there was a crash and a heavy fall.

It was about half an hour later that Brettison ascended the staircase, and as he reached the landing there was a puffing and panting behind him.

“It is you, then, Mr. Brettison,” cried Mrs. Brade joyfully ; “I thought it was you as you passed the lodge, and I am glad, sir. We began to think you must be dead and gone. Now do let me come and tidy up your room, sir, and make you a cup of tea.”

“No, no,” said Brettison. “I am going in here. Mr. Stratton and I are leaving town.”

“Mr. Stratton has gone, sir. Leastwise not at home.”

“What !”

“Mr. Guest was here a quarter of an hour ago, and said he’d been here once before. He couldn’t make no one hear.”

“Something has happened then,” said Brettison to himself, and a thrill of horror ran through his frame.



## CHAPTER XLIX.

### A PLACE OF REST.

“WELL, if ever two strange gentlemen did live in inns it's Mr. Stratton and Mr. Brettison,” said Mrs. Brade as she reluctantly went back to her lodge. “Nice state their rooms must be in ; and him once so civil and polite as awkward and gruff as you please.”

She had some cause for complaint, Brettison having dismissed her with a request not to talk quite so much.

In spite of the woman's declaration of Stratton's absence, the old man felt that he must be there ; and after knocking twice, each time with his heart sinking more and more with dread, he applied his lips to the letter box after forcing open the spring flap.

“Stratton, if you are there, for Heaven's sake open at once !” he whispered loudly.

There was a rustling sound directly, the bolt was shot back, and Stratton admitted him, afterward taking a letter from the box, glancing at it, and thrusting it into his pocket.

“That woman said you had gone out,” said Brettison eagerly. “I was alarmed. I thought—how is he ?”

Stratton pointed to the chair where the man lay as if asleep.

“Why, how haggard you look,” said Brettison excitedly. “Has there been anything the matter ?”

“Nothing much ; only I have had a struggle with a mad-man who tried to murder me.”

“My dear boy !”



"It is a fact," said Stratton. "I found him with that piece of rock in his hand, and about to strike me down."

He pointed to the massive stone lying on the table, and then said, smiling :

"I was just in time to save myself."

"Good Heavens! Was he dangerous for long?"

"For long enough. We had a short struggle, and he went down with a crash. One moment he was tremendously strong; the next helpless as a child, and he has been like that ever since. Our plans must be altered."

"No, not now," said Brettison decisively. "The man has been overexcited to-day. Your presence seems to have roused up feelings that have been asleep. I ought not to have left you alone with him. Come, it is getting late. We have very few minutes to spare."

"Then you mean to go?"

"Yes, I mean to go. You shall see us to the station. I have no fear of him; he will be calm enough with me."

"Very well," said Stratton, "anything to get him away from here. If he keeps on turning violent he must be placed under restraint." Stratton opened the door, placed his traveling bag outside, and came back.

"What does that mean?" said Brettison, pointing to the bag.

"Mine. You do not suppose I shall let you go alone."

"You cannot go now. I have managed him so long, and I can manage him still."

"We shall miss the train," said Stratton quietly; and taking the man's arm he drew it quietly through his, and after pausing to secure the door, walked with him down to the cab, Brettison following with the little valise.

They reached the station within five minutes of the time, and soon after were rattling down to Southampton, Stratton throwing himself back in a corner to draw a deep breath of relief as they left the busy town behind, and taking out his



letter, but only to glance at the handwriting, and thrust it back.

Their prisoner sank back to sleep heavily, and he was still in a drowsy state as they went on board, lying down quietly enough in his berth, where they left him and went on deck as soon as they were well out of the dock.

"Safe!" said Stratton exultingly. "Now, Brettison, that man must never see England again."

They reached Jersey in due time, and next morning were in St. Malo, where they stayed two days, making inquiries which resulted in their taking boat and being landed twenty miles along the coast at a picturesque, old-world fishing village—St. Garven's—where, lodgings being found, they both drew breath more freely, feeling at ease now—their companion having settled down into a calm, apathetic state, apparently oblivious of all that went on around him.

It was hard to believe that the dull, vacant-looking man was the same being as the one with whom Stratton had had his late terrible encounter; for in spite of the light, indifferent way in which he had treated it to his friend, none knew better than he that he had been within an inch of losing his life. It was hard even to Stratton, and as the days glided by in the peaceful calm of the tiny bay, with its groups of fishermen and women on the soft white sands, or wading into the clear blue water to reach their boats, the surroundings made the place a pleasant oasis in the desert of his life. The rest was sweet and languorous, and he passed his time now strolling out on the dry, warm sands, thinking, now high up on the grassy top of the cliff, where he could look down on people enjoying their seaside life.

At times he would go out with some of the fishermen, who readily welcomed the English stranger, and talked to him in a formal, grave way, and in French that he found it hard to follow.

Meanwhile Brettison had hunted out a brawny pleasant-



faced fisherman's wife, who had been pointed out to him as an able nurse, and placed their charge in her care—the ex-convict obeying her lightest sign and giving little trouble, suffering himself to be led to some nook or other at the foot of the high cliffs, where he would sit down, watched by his attendant—the Breton woman—while Brettison busied himself on the cliffs collecting.

There was no trouble ; the man grew more apathetic day by day, and Brettison took care that his companion should not come in contact with him, for fear of reviving some memory of the past and causing a scene.

“And he is so good and patient, m'sieu,” the nurse would say, looking up from the knitting over which she was busy ; “and he is growing well and strong, oh, so fast. It is our beautiful bay, monsieur. Yes, everyone grows strong and well here.”

She nodded as if there was no contradicting this, and Brettison went in search of Stratton with a bunch of plants in his hand, and a curiously puzzled look in his eyes.

“Suppose he does get well and strong,” he thought to himself. “I ought to be glad, but am not.”

He found Stratton sitting back, with his shoulders against the cliff, dreaming of the past, and then of the future, more at rest than he had been for months, and as Brettison drew near he brightened a little, and smiled. For the nurse's words applied to his friend as well, and he was certainly growing stronger and better. A healthy brown was coming into his face, and in spite of the dreamy reverie into which he plunged, a more even balance was coming to his mind.

“One must reckon one against the other,” Brettison said to himself.

As the days glided by, and they gained confidence from their charge's dull, dreamy condition, Brettison proposed, and Stratton readily agreed, to make little excursions with



him inland, or along the coast to some of the quaint villages, or antique—so-called Druidical—remains; and after each trip they returned to find nurse and patient just as they had left them. The confidence increased, and it became evident that Stratton had only to keep away for their charge to go on in his old vacant manner from day to day. His habits were simple and full of self-indulgence, if there could be any enjoyment to a mind so blank. He rose late, and went to bed soon after sundown, and the evenings were looked forward to by Stratton and Brettison for their quiet dinner at the little inn where Stratton stayed.

Here, as they sat over their wine and had cigars, watching the evening skies and the glorious star-gemmed sea, a feeling of restfulness came over them, and they leaned back with the feeling of convalescents whose wounds were healing fast after they had been very nearly to the gates of death.

It was a marvel to Stratton as he recalled the past, and, as he sat gazing from the open window or strolled out upon the dusky sands, he wondered that he could feel so well. In fact a sensation of annoyance attacked him, for he felt guilty and faithless, a traitor to the past, and strove to resume his old cloak of sadness, but it would not come.

"Malcolm, my lad," said Brettison one evening as he leaned forward and laid his hand upon the young man's arm, "we are going to have rest and peace again. Thank Heaven, you are growing like your old self."

"Rest and peace with that man yonder," said Stratton bitterly.

"Hah! That will not do. Now you've gone back to the old style. Let that be, and wait for the future to unroll itself. The man does not trouble us, and seems hardly likely to, and we have the satisfaction of knowing that we are working for someone else's peace of mind. You must not destroy what it is that has given you the rest you enjoy."



Stratton was silent for a few moments, and sat gazing out to sea, where the lanterns of the passing boat and yacht slowly rose and fell on the gently heaving sea.

"And who could help feeling restful in such a place as this? Even I, old and worn out as I am, enjoy the calm, languorous, peaceful sensation which steals over me. Very disloyal, my dear boy—un-English to a degree—but there is something in these places that one cannot get at home."

"Yes, I own to it," said Stratton after a pause; "one feels safe ashore after the perils of a mental wreck; but there are moments, old fellow, when I shrink and shiver, for it is as if a wave were noiselessly approaching to curl over and sweep one back into the dark waters."

"Stuff! that's all past," said Brettison, lighting a fresh cigar. "Here we are in a lovely place, and with only one care—which we depute to a nurse. Let's eat and drink our fill of the peace that has come to us."

"But it cannot go on, Brettison," said Stratton solemnly. "It must have an end."

"Yes; an end comes to all things, boy. I shall die before long, but why should I sit and brood upon that? Let's thankfully accept the good with the ill—no, not the ill," he said solemnly: "death is not an evil. It is only made so by man."

"But we cannot go on staying here," said Stratton with energy.

"Why not?"

"Oh, there are a dozen reasons. My work, for one."

"Nonsense! Sink your pride and grow strong and well. I have plenty for both of us, my boy."

"And do you think I shall settle down to such a life as that, Brettison? No; you know me better."

The old man was silent for a few minutes.

"Yes," he said at last; "I expected you to speak like that, but it is only absurd pride."



“I have not much left me in life,” said Stratton quietly as he rose from the seat he had occupied. “Let me enjoy that.”

Brettison made no reply. He was pained and yet pleased as he sat back and saw through the smoke of his cigar the dim figure of his companion pass and go down toward the sea, gradually growing more indistinct, till the darkness swallowed him.



## CHAPTER L.

### A NIGHT ALARM.

**T**HERE was a feeling in the air along that dark shore which accorded well with Stratton's sensations. The solemn melancholy of the place was calming ; and as he watched the sheet of spangled gold before him softly heaving and appearing to send the star reflections sweeping at last in a golden cream upon the sands, life seemed, after all, worth living, and his cares and sufferings petty and contemptible.

He wandered on close by the sea, where it broke gently in phosphorescent spray, till he was abreast of the cottage under the cliff where Brettison lodged with their charge. There was a feeble light burning, and it shed out its glow through the open door, while lamps glimmered from higher up the cliff, where three or four miniature châteaux, the property of Parisians—let to visitors to the lovely little fishing village—were snugly ensconced in the sheltering rocks.

There were voices just above the cottage, and a woman's speaking volubly, and he fancied he recognized that of the nurse, but felt that she would hardly have left her patient, though there was no reason why she should not, for Barron would have been in bed an hour or two, and it was absurd to expect her to be always on the watch.

Stratton felt a strong desire, almost irresistible, as he gazed at the light from the cottage door, to go up, enter, and gaze at the man who had come between him and happiness. He took a few steps forward under the influence



upon him, but only to stop and think, as the voluble voice above still went on in its peculiar French.

“It would not be safe,” he thought, with a shudder. His presence had influenced the man imperceptibly when waking, might it not also as he slept?

Stratton drew back, and continued his walk along the shore, enjoying the coolness of the fiery looking water which washed over and about his feet, full, as it were, of phosphorescent creatures, while here and there to his right, where the sea lay calm amid the rocks, the water was covered with what resembled a golden, luminous oil, which flashed softly at times with a bluish tint.

“Brettison is right,” he said to himself. “Life is grand, and it is our petty cares which spoil it. Not petty, though, mine,” he added, with a sigh. “Ah! what it might be if I could but hope.”

He drew a long, deep breath, and then made an effort to forget the past in the glory of the present. He bared his head to the soft, warm night air, and walked slowly on, gazing up into the depths of the vast arch above his head, where stars innumerable shone on and on till they resembled golden dust. The grandeur of the scene impressed him, and, feeling his own littleness more and more, he resolved to cast his old despondency aside and make a fresh start from that moment, accepting all his worries as the share apportioned to him, and cease to nurse them to the exclusion of the good.

He could not help a bitter smile crossing his lips the next minute as he stopped short; for there, dimly seen before him, were two figures gazing out to sea, and so occupied by their own thoughts that they had not noticed his approach. They were talking in a low voice of the sea and the phosphorescence—nothing more; but the tone of their voices!

The old, old story breathed in every modulation, and



Stratton sighed and drew silently away among the rocks farther from the sea, unnoticed by the pair, who turned and began to retrace their steps toward the lights he had left behind.

They were silent now ; but just as they passed him—their figures looking like one shadow between him and the luminous sea—the man said softly :

“ I often feel as if it were a sin to be so happy when I think of them.”

“ Yes.”

They passed on, while Stratton felt as if he had suddenly received a tremendous blow, and he staggered back a step or two with his hands to his brow.

Guest and Edie there ! Had he gone mad ?

He remained for a few seconds, as if paralyzed, before he could collect himself and follow the figures, which had now passed on and been swallowed up in the darkness. A cold perspiration broke out upon his face, and he walked on to overtake them—hurriedly now ; but by degrees, as he drew near enough to make out their silent, shadowy figures, seeming to glide over the soft sand, he grew a little more calm.

For he felt that the fact of his dwelling so much upon the Jerrold family had made him ready to jump at the conclusion that this was Edie and her lover. He could not distinguish face or figure in the gloom, and he had only had the man's voice to suggest the idea—the woman's was but a whisper. They were English, of course ; but what of that ? It was a foolish mistake ; for it was utterly impossible that Guest and Edie could be alone there that night upon those sands.

All the same, he followed to see where they went, shrinking from going closer, now that he felt less sure, in dread lest he should seem to be acting the part of spy upon two strangers ; while if it were they it would be madness to



speaking. There was only one thing to be done : warn Bretton, and get their charge away at once.

There before him walked the pair so slowly and leisurely that he had to be careful not to overtake them. They were nearing the cottage with the open door, but the loud voice he had heard in passing was silent now, and the stillness was oppressive—the beating of his own heart and the soft whispering “whish” of the feet on the loose sand being all that was audible to his ears.

It now occurred to him that, by a little management, he would be able to convince himself that this was only a mad fancy ; for the couple must pass the open door, and if he struck off a little to his left, so as to get nearer to the sea, he could hurry on unseen, and get opposite to the door, so that when they passed the light he would have them like silhouettes for a moment or two, quite long enough to make out their profiles.

He set about carrying his plan into effect, and in a minute or so was abreast of the pair, but they were quite invisible now ; and, feeling that he had gone too far, as soon as he was opposite to the lighted door he began to advance slowly, expecting moment by moment to see the two figures move into the light ; but they did not come.

They must pass the door, he felt, for he could recall no way up the cliff, the house perched up there being approached by a broad step-like path from the rough roadway leading up the ravine which came down to the shore with its stream, beside which, on either side, many of the cottages were built.

Still they did not come, but Stratton waited patiently, for, lover-like, they might be hanging back for a few moments before approaching the light.

At last a dark figure in front of the doorway was plainly enough seen, and Stratton leaned forward with eyes dilated, but only to utter a muttered interjection, for the figure he



saw was undoubtedly Brettison, as he stood there apparently peering about in the darkness.

Another moment or two, and still no sign of the figures he sought, and, wondering whether they could have passed through some miscalculation on his part, he stepped forward quickly to make sure, when he became visible to Brettison, who joined him at once.

"There you are, then. I was getting uneasy. One of the fishermen saw you go along in this direction, and I was beginning to think that I must get some of them to come and help me search for you."

"Why?" said Stratton harshly.

"Because the coast is dangerous, and there is always the risk of anyone being surrounded by the advancing tide."

"Tide is going down," said Stratton quietly. "See anybody pass?" he continued as he debated whether he should take Brettison into his confidence, while all the time he kept a sharp look about him.

"No, not a soul. The most solitary place a man could select for a stay."

"Is there a way up into the village beyond the cottage here?" said Stratton quietly.

"Yes, but it is only a sort of flight of steps used by the people here. It would be farther round, too. Better keep to the beach."

As he spoke Brettison walked by his side, and tried to edge him away from the light, speaking in quite a whisper the while, as if afraid that their voices might reach the occupant of the cottage.

And meanwhile Stratton was still debating within himself as to whether he should tell his companion of the startling adventure he had had. But feeling more and more that the idea was only colored by his imagination, and knowing in his heart that the old man would smile and point out the impossibility of such an encounter, he deter-



mined to be silent till the morning—if he could not learn anything about any visitors who might be staying there.

Twice over as they walked he was on the point of speaking, but checked himself, and then the opportunity was gone, for Brettison held out his hand.

“Good-night, my boy,” he said ; “you are tired. There, go to the inn and have a good night’s rest.”

“One moment, Brettison,” said Stratton, arresting him. “You do not think it possible that——”

He stopped short : he could not say it. The idea was absurd.

“Well, think what possible ?” said Brettison, smiling.

“That he is likely to turn dangerous ?”

“I have no fear of him whatever,” said the old man. “There, don’t fidget ; good-night.”

Stratton went on to the inn, wishing that he had spoken to Brettison, after all ; and he had hardly taken his seat before he sprang up again to go back to him. Before starting he summoned the landlady to question her about visitors to the place, but only to find in a few minutes that her knowledge was confined to those who came to her hotel. There were people who let their houses and took in lodgers, she knew—yes, but she had no patience with people who played at keeping an hotel.

Stratton went out once more into the night with the intention of going straight to Brettison, telling him his suspicions, and asking his advice ; but he shrank from the task ; and on the impulse of the moment turned off to go and explore the village on the chance of happening upon something which would give him a clew.

Five minutes devoted to his task was sufficient to satisfy him of the hopelessness of the task, and he returned to the inn agitated, weary, and trying to make some plan as to his proceedings as soon as it was light.



"The post!" he said to himself. He would be able to learn there; and half disposed to hire some vehicle and go across ten miles to the town, he entered the doorway, to start once more, this time with a thrill of certainty.

For, as he advanced, he saw at the end of the passage a man in conversation with the landlady. He was making inquiries about a boat for a sail next day. The next minute he turned to leave, and came face to face with Guest.

"Great Heavens!" cried the latter hoarsely; "you or your ghost. O Mal, old man, if it is you how could you be so mad?"

"Mad? Mad?" stammered Stratton. "What do you mean?"

"Why, as to follow me?"

"I—I did not know you were here."

"Oh, hang that, man. I told you in my letter."

"What letter?"

"The one I wrote and pushed into your letter box after coming twice to tell you."

"Letter?"

"Why, of course. You had it or you couldn't have come here."

Stratton's hand went to his breast, and the next minute he drew out a soiled letter doubled up into three from the pressure of his pocketbook.

"You wrote this letter to me to tell me you were coming here?" said Stratton in slow, strange accents.

"Of course I did, and I tell you that you have done a mean, cruel thing in following me. It can do no good; Sir Mark will be furious, and it is cruel to Myra."

"Myra—Myra here!" gasped Stratton as he reeled against the wall.

"Don't make a scene, man," said Guest in a low whisper. "Of course; I told you she was coming, and how the old



man insisted upon my coming too. Why, you haven't opened the letter !”

“No,” said Stratton in a hoarse whisper.

“Then how came you here?”

“I—Heaven only knows !” said Stratton. “It is beyond me.”

Guest looked at him curiously, as if he doubted his word.

“We only came to-day. Had to stop at place after place ; Myra is so weak and ill.”

Stratton groaned.

“Yes,” said Guest ; “that's better. Now look here. You and I will start off at daybreak for home. It's hard on me, but it must be done.”

“Yes. I saw you two—on the sands to-night. I was not sure. But tell me, where are they staying ?”

“At a little château-like place on the cliff ; they got it through a woman they knew at St. Malo a couple or three years ago. She was servant there. She is nurse now to an invalid gentleman staying at a cottage just below.”

Stratton stood gazing at his friend as if he had been turned to stone.



## CHAPTER LI.

### AND ALL IN VAIN.

GUEST stood looking at his friend for a few moments, half astonished, half annoyed.

"Look here," he said at last, taking his arm and drawing it through his own, "we can't talk freely in this place. Come out and have a cigar on the sands."

Stratton made no reply, but walked out with him like a man who had been stunned, Guest taking the direction opposite to that in which the admiral's temporary home lay. Then, stopping short by the ebbing sea, he drew out his cigar case and offered it ; but it was waved aside.

"Quite right," said Guest shortly ; "we can't smoke now. Look here, old fellow, I shouldn't be your friend if I did not speak out when you were in the wrong. You must have known we were coming here, and you must see now that you have done, as I said, a cruel thing in coming ; so give me your word as a man of honor that you will be ready to start with me in the morning first thing."

"I tell you I did not know they were coming here," said Stratton in a deep, solemn tone ; "I tell you I did not follow you, and I tell you that I cannot leave here with you in the morning."

"Then how in the world did you come here ?"

"I don't know. I suppose it was fate."

"Bosh ! Who believes in fate ? Don't talk nonsense, man. I am horribly sorry for you, as sorry as I can be for a man who is my friend, but who has never trusted or confided in me ; but I stand now toward the admiral and Myra in such a position that I cannot keep aloof



and see them insulted—well, I will not say that—see their feelings hurt by the reckless conduct of a man who is in the wrong.”

“In the wrong?” said Stratton involuntarily.

“Yes, in the wrong. You have wronged Myra.”

Stratton sighed.

“And made her the wreck she is. I don’t say you could have made things better by speaking out—that is your secret—but I do say you could make matters better by keeping away.”

“Yes, I must go away as soon as possible.”

“You will, then?” cried Guest eagerly. “In the morning?”

“No; yes, if I can get away.”

“That’s quibbling, man; an excuse to get near and see her,” cried Guest angrily.

“I swear it is not,” cried Stratton. “You will not believe me even after seeing your letter—which I had forgotten—was unopened.”

“I can’t, Mal. I wish to goodness I could.”

“Never mind. I can say no more.”

“You mean that you will say no more,” said Guest shortly.

“I mean what I said,” replied Stratton.

“Very well. You must take your road; I must take mine.”

Stratton was silent, and Guest turned short round on his heel, took a couple of steps away, but turned back.

“Mal, old chap, you make me wild,” he cried, holding out his hand. “I know it’s hard to bear—I know how you loved her, but sacrifice self for your honor’s sake; be a man, and come away. There, I’ll walk with you to the post town. You’ll come?”

“I cannot yet.”

“Why?”



"It is better that I should not tell you," replied Stratton firmly. "Will you trust me?"

"Will you confide in me, and tell me all your reasons for this strange conduct?"

"Some day; not now."

"You will not trust me, and you ask me to trust you. It can't be done, man; you ask too much. Once more, are we to be friends?"

"Yes."

"Then you will go?"

"Yes."

"At once?"

"No."

"Bah!" ejaculated Guest angrily, and he turned and strode away, while Stratton uttered a low sigh of misery, and yet of relief, for his friend's presence was irksome to him now that he wanted to act.

He waited until Guest had been gone for some minutes, and then, taking a short cut, he strode along the sands, half in dread of encountering him again, but feeling that he must risk it, though certain that if they did meet Guest would reproach him with going toward the admiral's residence in order to obtain an interview with Myra.

"He must think it—he must think it," muttered Stratton as he hurried on, now stumbling over a piece of rock, now slipping on some heap of weed left by the tide. But he pressed forward, making straight for a light which shone out plainly halfway up the cliff, and which he instinctively judged to be at Sir Mark's abode, and a sense of despair clutched his heart as he felt how he was to be so near and yet dared not even look, much less speak.

Suddenly he found that, though he was making straight for the cliff, he was wading through water; but he kept on, believing that he had entered a pool left by the tide, till the water rose from his ankles to his knees, and a rushing



sound warned him that the tide had turned and was coming in fast. Then he knew that he must have been walking along one of the spits of sand round which the flowing tide curved, and that if he retraced his steps it might be to find the other end covered, besides losing time.

The darkness confused him, and he stopped, hesitating for a few moments ; then, feeling that, whether the water deepened or receded, he must press on, he drew a deep breath and moved forward, the tide soon rising to his waist, and a wave nearly taking him off his legs.

Was it to be his fate to be drowned now at such a critical time, he asked himself, there in sight of the light that might be shining from the room which the woman he sought to save from suffering now occupied ?

As this thought ran through his mind the waves rushed back with a hiss, the water falling to his knees, and, making a dash forward he found that he had passed the deepest part of the channel scooped by the tide in the sand. Five minutes later he was on dry land, with the water streaming from him, and soon after the light which had been his guide disappeared.

He rightly judged, though, that it must be from his having approached nearer to the cliff ; and, pressing on in spite of the darkness, he at last reached it, but was unable to judge whether he was to right or left of the cottage that he sought.

Once more he felt in despair, for he knew that time was gliding rapidly by, and that by some means they ought to leave before day.

He was about to try off to the right when all at once he heard voices above his head to the left, and, listening intently, he made out the deep tones of the admiral, and an answer came in Guest's familiar voice.

"Is he telling him that I am here ?" thought Stratton. No, for there was a pleasant little laugh—Edie's ; and the



constriction at the listener's heart was painful as he stood there thinking and wishing to hear the voice of the woman he loved better than his life.

But the next who spoke was the admiral, and his words came distinctly to where, with every nerve strained, Stratton stood rooted to the sands.

"Well, I'm sorry," said Sir Mark, "but we've plenty of time. We'll have a sail another day, and a wander about the sands to-morrow. I'll charter a boat at St. Malo, and make her come round. Now, my dears, in with you ; it's getting late."

"My dears !" Then Myra was there all the time above where he stood ; and in the silence and darkness which surrounded him Stratton sank upon his knees, and buried his face in his hands as he offered up a prayer for the safety of his lost love.

He sprang to his feet. The cottage must be close at hand, and in a few moments he was opposite the door of the long, low habitation on its little shelf of the cliff.

All was darker than ever, for the flowing tide had brought with it a chilling mist, but there was no difficulty in finding Brettison's window, Barron's being next, at the end of the little house, the nurse and the owner and his wife occupying rooms on the other side of the door.

Everyone had retired ; and Stratton hesitated, feeling that he must defer his communication till the morning.

No ; impossible. The wife not a hundred feet above where he stood—the convict husband close at hand, where he in his blindness had brought him. At all hazards such a critical position must be ended, and he tapped gently at Brettison's casement.

There was not a sound in answer, and he tapped again and again more loudly. Then, with a rising sensation of anger that a man could sleep calmly in the midst of such peril, he was about to tap again when he was conscious



of a faint sound within, and directly after a voice said softly :

“ Who is there ? ”

“ I—Stratton.”

The fastening grated, and the window was thrown open.

“ What is it ? ” whispered Brettison ; “ are you ill ? ”

“ Yes ; sick at heart. We must be off at once.”

“ Hist ! speak lower ! there is only the closed door between my room and his,” whispered Brettison, “ and he is restless to-night. I’ve heard him move and mutter. In Heaven’s name, what is it—the police on the scent ? ”

“ Would that they were waiting to take him off this moment, man,” whispered Stratton. “ Myra and her father are here.”

“ You’re mad.”

“ Yes. But they are in the house above.”

“ They—the newcomers just arrived ? ”

“ Yes. I thought I saw Guest and Edie to-night in the darkness. I was going to tell you, but I felt ashamed, thinking you would say what you did just now. But I have met Guest since, and spoken with him. Five minutes ago I heard Sir Mark speaking.”

“ Great Heavens ! ” gasped Brettison again. “ Then we have brought him here to place wife and husband face to face ! ”

“ Yes,” said Stratton hoarsely.

“ What is to be done ? ”

“ You must rouse him quietly, and steal out with him. Bring him along under the cliff close up to the inn. While you are getting him there I will go and hire a cart by some means to take us to the next place ; failing that, I’ll arrange with some fishermen to run us along the coast in their boat to St. Malo. You understand ? ”

“ Yes,” said Brettison. “ I understand, but it is impossible.”



“Perhaps ; but this is the time to perform impossibilities. It must be done !”

“I tell you it is impossible,” said Brettison slowly. “At the first attempt to rouse him there would be a scene. He would turn obstinate and enraged. He is restless, as I told you. I should have to awaken the people here ; for I could not force him to leave by the window, and this would precipitate the discovery, perhaps bring Sir Mark and your friend Guest down from the place above.”

“I tell you it must be done,” said Stratton, but with less conviction.

“You know it cannot be,” said Brettison firmly. “I am certain that he would have one of his fits. Think of the consequences then.”

“I do,” whispered Stratton ; “and the thoughts are maddening. What’s that ?”

“Speak lower. It was Barron moving in his room. Look here ; there need be no discovery if we are cool and cautious. It is absurd to attempt anything now. Wait till the morning. Let him get up at his usual time. He will be quiet and manageable then. I will keep him in, and wait till the Jerrolds are gone out—they are sure to go—most likely to sea for a sail—and then join you at the inn, where you can have a carriage or boat waiting. Then we must escape just as we stand ; our luggage could be fetched another time. We can be going to take him for a drive.”

Stratton was silent.

“It is the only way, I’m sure,” whispered Brettison.

“Yes,” said Stratton, with a sigh ; “I am afraid you are right.”

“I am sure I am.”

“Yes,” said Stratton. “Hist ! is that he moving again ?”

“And talking in his sleep. But you are sure there is no doubt ?”



"Doubt, man? No. Yes, it must be as you say; but, mind, I shall be a prisoner at the inn. I cannot stir out. You must give me warning when you will come."

"And you must not speak or notice him."

"Oh, we must risk all that," said Stratton more loudly. "Our only course is at all risks to get him right away."

"Hush! Be silent. Now go."

Stratton hesitated as he heard a low muttering again in the next room; but Brettison pressed his hand and thrust him away.

"Go," he said, and softly closed the window, while, after standing listening for a few moments, Stratton moved away with a strange foreboding of coming peril, and walked back beneath the cliff to the inn, where the sleepy servant admitted him with a sigh of relief, and wondered how *les Anglais* could be so strange and care so little for their beds.



## CHAPTER LII.

### THE CULMINATION OF DESPAIR.

STRATTON went to his room, put out his light, and threw open the casement to sit and listen to the wash and rush of the coming tide. It was darker than ever, for the sea fog had grown dense, and the water sobbed and moaned among the rocks, and splashed against the sides of the fishing boats in a way that in the silence of the night sounded mysterious and strange.

All this added to Stratton's depression, and the sense of coming trouble. It was impossible to pass it over as imaginary, face to face as he was with the terrible difficulties before him ; for in that tiny place, unless Barron was hurried away, a meeting was imminent, and it was his doing—his.

Guest laughed at the idea of his presence there being due to fate, he recalled ; but how else could he think of the strange complication but as being wrought out by a greater directing hand ? “ And for what ? ” he muttered. Could it be only to inflict fresh torture upon a gentle, loving woman ?

The mental outlook was as black and misty as that across the sands to the moaning, sighing sea ; and as Stratton sat there, with the damp, soft air cooling his brow, he longed for rest, and thought of the peace and gentle calm that he might find if he could take a boat and sail right away into the soft, black darkness.

He shook his head mournfully, though, for he knew that he could not sail away from his thoughts, and that it would



be the act of a coward to try and escape from the sufferings which fell to his lot.

To sleep was impossible. He did not even think of lying down, but sat there waiting for the first streaks of day with the face of Myra always before him, her eyes looking gravely into his with a sweet, trustful tenderness, which made him recall her visit to his chambers that night when she knelt before him with her arms outstretched to take him to her breast, and he asked himself why he had shrunk from her—why he had not crushed down conscience, and the horror of his having slain her husband, and taken her away—anywhere so that they two could have been together far from the world and its ways.

For his dread had been his own making. It was not real. The shot was an accident, not even dealt by his own hand, and the man had lived. Myra would have been his, and they might have been happy.

Was it too late, even now? If he could only reach her ear and tell her how all stood. She loved him—he knew that. Once with Myra meant till death, and she would follow him to the world's end.

“And I sit here,” he cried, and started from his seat, “when she is there yonder waiting for me. A word would rouse her from her sleep, if she does sleep. She may be sitting at her window even now, wakeful and wretched as I, and ready to trust me, to let me lead her far away from all this misery and despair. Heaven never could mean us to suffer as we do. It is a natural prompting. She must be waiting for me now.”

The moments of exaltation passed, and he sank down again to bury his face in his hands, knowing that it was all the madness of a despairing man.

No; he could do nothing but that which he and Brettison had planned—nothing but wait for the morning, which was yet hours away.



He grew calmer as the night passed on ; firmer, too, and there was a quiet determination in his thoughts as he felt that some day Myra would know all that he had done, and perhaps, after all, happiness might be theirs.

For hope came with the approach of day, and when at last the first pale dawn appeared in the east, and by degrees there was a delicious opalescent tint on the waves, where a soft breeze was slowly wafting away the mist, it was a calm, grave, thoughtful man, nerved to the day's task, who went forth with the knowledge that the people of the inn were already stirring, for as he stepped out a casement was opened, and the landlady greeted him with the customary *bon jour*.

Stratton returned the greeting, and told her his requirements—a sailing boat and men to take him and his friends for a good long cruise.

“Ah, yes !” said the landlady ; “of course, and monsieur would pay them well”—and at another time there were Jacques, and Jean, and André, and many more who would have been so glad—for it was going to be a day superb : look at the light on the water like the silver and sheen upon a mackerel, to prove her words—but the hands went out last night, and would not return in time from the fishing.

“But was there no one else ?”

“Not a soul, monsieur. Why, there was a great nobleman—an old sea admiral—English, at the little château who had sent only last night, wanting a boat to sail with the beautiful ladies he had brought, one of whom was a stately old marquise, at least, with hair gray ; but no, he could not have a boat for any money. Why could not monsieur take his sick friend for a beautiful long drive ?”

Stratton jumped at the proposal.

“Yes ; that would do,” he said.

“Then Guillaume should have the horse and chaise ready at any time monsieur chose to name.”



A sense of relief came over Stratton as he finished his arrangements. The car was to be waiting till the sick friend was brought over, and then they would start at once—after breakfast—no, perhaps sooner. It was to be ready for them to start at any time; for the invalid was capricious; and it was uncertain when they would come back.

Stratton could do no more but wait. He dared not show himself for fear the admiral might be out early; and he shuddered at the idea of the old man strolling about on the sands and encountering Brettison and his charge.

But he felt that his old friend would take care, and, going back to his rooms with the intention of forcing himself to wait patiently, he watched the sun rise in all its glory over the sea of fire, while the clouds and mists around were one blaze of effulgent hues.

It was impossible to help a feeling of elation as nature smiled upon him full of hope and joy; and the determination to act manfully and well grew and grew in Stratton's breast as, in obedience to a thought, he went to where a glass hung in the passage of the little inn, and took it up to his window.

It was with throbbing heart that he adjusted it, and brought it to bear upon the pretty little château high upon the cliff, covered with creepers, and with its terrace garden a mass of flowers.

He scanned window after window, but not a soul was visible, and after a time he brought it to bear on the fisher's cottage at the foot of the cliff, where he saw the smoke curling up clear and blue, though it was quite a mile away. Dale's brawny French nurse stood outside in the early morning sunshine knitting. The fisherman was at his boat making some repairs, where it lay bottom upward, and his wife was going in and out busy over household affairs, but it was too early for sign of the other occupants.

After a time Stratton was summoned to breakfast, and,



after swallowing a little bread and coffee hastily, he made sure that the car and driver were ready, and with the excitement growing, returned to his place of observation with the glass, where he was seen by the landlady, who remarked to herself how anxious monsieur was about his friend.

At that moment the glass was trembling, and its eye-piece seemed blurred; for it was fixed upon the figure of a tall, graceful woman, standing outside one of the windows in the terrace garden of the little château, with a hand raised to shade her eyes, as she looked along the coast line, but appeared to be gazing straight at where Stratton watched her with the glass.

One minute of delirious joy as he observed her features, then all was blurred, and he closed up the glass; he dared not gaze, for his brain swam, and when the insane desire to look once more came over him, and he yielded, the figure in its soft, white, clinging drapery, was gone, and he sternly turned the glass upon the cottage, to watch for the coming of Brettison, till his eyes refused to distinguish the place.

He felt that they ought to be on their way now, while the occupants of the house above were at their morning meal; but there was still no sign, and another hour passed full of agony for Stratton, till he forced himself to believe that Brettison was acting for the best, and that there must be good reason for his keeping back.

He took the glass again, and concluded why his friend had not come; for he saw a group now upon the terrace, and directly after could trace their descent beyond the cottage to the sands—the admiral first, with Myra leaning on his arm, then the stately figure of Miss Jerrold, and lastly Edie and Guest; and all so close to him that he could almost read the expression on their features as they stopped and walked past the cottage as if about to come in his direction.



Stratton's heart beat, for there was the possibility of Barron appearing at the cottage door, but they turned again, went on toward the southeast and soon disappeared beyond the rocks which lay scattered along the shore.

"Brettison will be here directly," thought Stratton, and after watching for a few minutes a thought struck him: they would perhaps come along the path at the top of the cliff, and in the belief that this might be so he hurried out to warn the car driver to be ready.

Hardly had he returned to his room when the landlady appeared to say that a boy was there to deliver a message to him alone, and upon going out a heavy looking peasant announced that he was to go on to the cottage.

Stratton caught up his hat and started, full of anxiety, for it was evident that Brettison was having trouble with their charge, who was perhaps obstinate and fretful, while before he was halfway there he began to regret not bringing the car, so that they might have started at once.

But he felt the next moment that it was folly to bring a wheeled vehicle down upon that heavy sand, and keeping a sharp lookout for those he wished to avoid, and taking advantage of every sheltering rock, he at length reached the cottage, at whose door he was met by the fisherman.

Stratton saw at a glance that something was wrong; but before he could get out a word the fisherman's wife, who was evidently suffering from fear, stammered that she was desolated to have to send for the monsieur.

"Where is my friend?" said Stratton sharply.

"In his chamber, monsieur, exceedingly ill."

Stratton hurried in, to find Brettison in bed looking pinched of cheek, his eyes sunken and blue beneath the lids, and perfectly insensible.

"What does this mean?" cried Stratton.

"We did not hear the gentleman moving this morning, but my husband heard him stirring in the night, sir; oh, yes;



and when I went to call him he answered so strangely that I entered and gave a cry, for he looked as if he was going to the death, monsieur.

"I wanted to send for you, but he forbade me. He said he would be better soon, and I made him tea, and gave him some cognac, and he grew better, then worse, then better again. It is something bad with his throat, monsieur. Look, it is—all worse, quite blue."

Stratton gazed at the livid marks in horror.

"Where is Mr. Cousin, our invalid?" he said, beginning to tremble now.

"Oh, he, monsieur, he insisted upon going out on the sands with his attendant Margot."

"Which way?" gasped Stratton.

"Yonder, monsieur," said the woman, pointing to the southeast.

"Here, get cognac; bathe his face," panted Stratton, half wild now with horror; "and send someone for the nearest doctor. Quick. I shall be back soon—if I live," he muttered as he rushed off through the deep, loose sand to find and bring back their charge before he encountered the Jerrolds on the beach.

He could not see far for the rocks that strewed the shore, which was apparently deserted. The sun beat down upon his head, and the effort to advance grew more painful, and yet he passed through maze after maze of stones fallen in huge masses from the cliffs above, without seeing a sign, till all at once, as he passed round one huge mass, beyond which lay scores of others covered with barnacle and weed, he heard voices, and stopped short, hidden from the group before him by one of the rocks.

His toil had been in vain, and a jealous, maddening pang shot through him.

There, some forty yards away, sat Barron upon a huge boulder, his back propped against a rock, and his attendant



knitting a short distance back, while Miss Jerrold sat on the sands reading beneath a great sunshade. The admiral was smoking his cigar, looking down at Barron ; Edie and Guest were together ; and Myra, pale, gentle, and with a smile upon her lip, was offering the invalid a bunch of grapes, which he was gently taking from her hand.

“The past condoned,” said Stratton to himself ; “the future—well, he is her husband, after all. Great Heavens, am I really mad, or is all this a waking dream ?”

He staggered back and nearly fell, so terrible was the rush of horror through his brain, but he could not draw away his eyes, and he saw that Barron was speaking and holding out his hand—that Myra responded by laying hers within his palm, and the fingers closed upon it—fingers that not many hours back must have held Brettison’s throat in a deadly grip.



## CHAPTER LIII.

### JULES IS FROM HOME.

“**A**ND that is the woman who told me she loved me!” said Stratton as he drew back behind the rocks and walked slowly away.

There was a strangely mingled feeling in his breast ; one moment it was horror, the next disgust, that they two should join hands : she so young and beautiful, he prematurely aged and little better than an idiot. Then it was misery—then despair, which swept over his soul to join forces and harrow him so that he felt that he could bear no more.

It was the thought of Brettison that saved him just as the blood was rushing to his head and a stroke was imminent.

He had left his friend apparently dying, and had rushed off to save Myra.

“While I was wanted there,” he muttered in a weak, piteous way. “Ah, it has all been a dream, and now I am awake. Poor Brettison, my best friend after all.”

For a few moments the blood flushed to his temples in his resentment against Myra, and then against Guest ; for, after all that he had said to him on the past night, how could he entirely accept the position he occupied and remain tacit and content there with that man in his company ?

“Another slave to a woman’s charms !” he said, with a bitter laugh. “Poor old Percy ! how can I blame him after what I have done myself for a weak, contemptible woman’s sake ?”



He stopped short, grinding his teeth together in resentment against himself ; for Myra's sadly wasted face rose before him with her eyes full of reproach.

"It is not true," he cried ; "it is not true. She could not help herself. They have driven her to it, or else—— No, no, I cannot think."

He moved on toward the cottage, threading his way more by instinct than sight among the rocks, but only to stop short again, horrified by the thought that now assailed him. That man—Barron or Dale—it was not safe that he should be trusted with Myra. It was madness after what had taken place.

He thrust his fingers into his ears as if to shut out the voice that seemed to urge these things upon him ; but the voice was within, and he hastened on more rapidly till he reached the cottage, where the fisherman's wife was bathing Brettison's forehead, and she gave him a frightened look as he entered.

His old friend's eyes were opened, and he looked wildly at Stratton as he entered, and feebly raised one hand.

"Dale !" he whispered as he clung to Stratton.

"Hush ! don't talk."

"I—must," he said feebly. "Mind that he does not leave the place. To-night you must get help and take him away."

"I am right, then—he did attack you ?"

"Yes, not long after you had gone. I was asleep, when I was awakened with a start, thinking you had returned, but I was borne back directly. He had me by the throat. Malcolm, lad, I thought it was all over. I struggled, but he was too strong. I remember thinking of your words, and then all was blank till I saw a light in the room, and found these people attending me. I had awakened them with my groans. They do not grasp the truth. Don't tell



them. Let them think it is an affection of the throat, but we must never trust him again."

"There will be no need," said Stratton bitterly.

"What do you mean?"

"He has gone."

"You have let him escape? No; you have handed him over to the police. Oh, my dear boy, you shouldn't have done that. The man is mad."

"I told you I should not do so," said Stratton coldly. "You are wrong."

"But you stand there. Good Heavens, man! Those two may meet. Don't mind me. I am better now. Go at once."

"No, I shall not leave you till you are fit to move."

"It is not an illness, but an injury, which will soon pass off. Go at once. Man, do you not see that he may find her, after all."

"He has found her," said Stratton slowly, and speaking in a strangely mechanical way.

"What!"

"Or they have found him." And he told the old man all he had seen.

Brettison heard him to the end, and then faintly, but with conviction in his tones, he cried:

"Impossible! It cannot be true."

Stratton looked at him wistfully, and shook his head.

"No," he said, drawing a deep breath; "it cannot be true."

Brettison, whose breathing was painful, lay back watching his companion with dilated eyes, and then turned to the woman who had drawn back from the bed and waited while her visitor talked to his friend.

"Madame," he said in French, "M. Cousin?"

She turned from the window where she had been watching.



"Out on the sands, monsieur," she said in a startled way. "My good man says he is sitting with the new company who have come since yesterday to the house above."

"Where is your husband?"

"Out, sir. He—he was obliged to go to the *ville*."

"And still it is impossible," said Stratton slowly as he looked appealingly in the old man's eyes. "It cannot be true. Brettison, tell me that my mind is wandering; all this is more than I can bear."

"Shall I wait, monsieur?" asked the woman, who was trembling visibly.

"No, I am better now," said Brettison. "Leave me with my friend"—and as soon as they were alone—"I shall not want a doctor now. There is some mystery here, Malcolm, lad, far more than we know."

"Thank God!" said Stratton, sinking into a chair and covering his face with his hands.

"Stratton," cried the old man fiercely, "is it a time to give up weakly like that?"

The stricken man started to his feet, and threw back his head as if his friend's words had suddenly galvanized him into life and action.

"That man is not to be trusted for an hour. You know it, and yet you stand there leaving her in his hands. Even if it were possible that her father has condoned the past, he does not know what is familiar to us. But he has not. Boy, I tell you there is some mistake."

"What shall I do?" said Stratton hoarsely.

"Go to them at once. Tell them of his attack upon me."

"They have forgotten the past, and will say it is the invention of a jealous enemy."

"Then I will go myself," cried the old man; and, feeble though he was, he insisted upon dressing for his self-imposed task.



"They will believe me," he said ; "and though I can hardly think there is danger to anyone but us, whom Barron seems instinctively to associate with his injury, Sir Mark must know the facts."

"Yes," said Stratton gravely ; "he must know. I will go with you now. He cannot doubt you."

The old man tottered a little, but his strong will supplied the strength, and, taking his stick, they moved toward the door.

"We have done wrong, Stratton," he said ; "the man should have been denounced. I ought to have acted more wisely, but at first my only thought was to save you from the consequences of your misfortune, and keep all I knew from ever reaching Myra's ears. Our sin has found us out, and there is nothing for it but to make a clean breast now."

Stratton hesitated for a few moments.

"You are too feeble," he said.

"Oh, yes," cried the woman, who came forward. "Monsieur is too ill to go out. It is horrible that he should be so bad at our poor house."

"You say your husband is out?"

"Oh, yes, monsieur. I begged him not to go, but he said that he must go."

"Not to fetch a doctor?"

"N—no, monsieur," faltered the woman hysterically. "It is not my fault, monsieur ; I begged him not to go—and—*O Ciel!* that it should have happened."

"No one blames you, my good woman," said Stratton as she burst into a hysterical fit of sobbing, while Brettison looked at her strangely. "If he had been here he could have helped my friend down to the sands."

"And monsieur will forgive us," sobbed the woman ; "we are poor, honest people, and it is so terrible for your good friend to be like that."



“Quick !” said Brettison. “I am strong enough. Let’s get it over before something happens.”

He clung to Stratton’s arm, and, supporting himself with his stick, he made a brave effort, and, gaining strength out in the soft sea air, he walked slowly but pretty firmly along by the foot of the cliff.

“If Jules would only return,” sobbed the woman hysterically. “Oh, that such a misfortune should come upon our home ! Poor gentleman ! and he bears it like a lamb.”



## CHAPTER LIV.

### BARRON-DALE HAS A RELAPSE.

BRETTISON'S progress was slow, but he refused to sit down and rest.

"We must get there," he said; "we must get there."

Stratton shuddered slightly, and for the moment felt that he ought to press on; but he knew that his words would have ten times the force with the admiral backed up by Brettison's presence, so he restrained himself and helped his companion along till they came in sight of the rocks, a good-sized boat keeping pace with them a couple of hundred yards out, its owners having hard work to stem the current which ran along the shore.

"Is it much farther?" said Brettison at last. "I am weaker than I thought."

"Seventy or eighty yards; just beyond those rocks," cried Stratton.

"Hah, then I am strong enough," cried Brettison, with a sigh of relief; and after a few moments' pause he stepped out again; they passed the rocks, and the doubt which had existed in Stratton's mind as to whether the party would still be where he left them was set at rest. But he started as he saw that they were gathered together as if there were some cause of excitement.

"Come along," he whispered quickly.

They were hurrying along, when there was a joyful cry, and the sturdy Breton woman chosen for Dale's attendant cried out:

"Ah, monsieur; quick! quick! Here—help!"



Stratton quitted Brettison's side and rushed forward, to see, as the group opened, a sight that made his blood boil with rage.

Dale was holding Myra's wrist with his left hand and struggling violently with the admiral and Guest, who were afraid to exert their strength for fear of injuring Myra, who was supported by Margot with one arm, while with her strong fingers she grasped her patient's wrist in turn.

"Quick, monsieur!" cried Margot; "it is a fit. He is half mad."

Forgetting everything but the fact that Myra was in this scoundrel's grasp, Stratton sprang at him, catching him by the throat to try and make him quit his hold.

"Mr. Stratton!" cried Sir Mark in angry amazement.

The name acted like magic. Dale shook himself free of the admiral and Margot, loosening Myra's wrist in the act, and with an angry snarl, like that of some wild beast, fixed his hands on Stratton's throat.

In spite of his last meeting Guest flew to his friend's assistance, and Margot bravely flung her arms about her patient's waist; but in spite of all the man's strength for the moment was gigantic, and, paying no heed to the others, he sought to vent his rage upon Stratton, who felt himself growing weaker and weaker in his enemy's grasp.

Twice over as they swayed here and there he caught sight of Myra's face convulsed with horror while she clung to her cousin, and her look unnerved him so that it would have gone hard with him but for the arrival of a party of four men who had landed from the boat that had kept pace with them along the shore.

One of these was the fisherman, the two others were a couple of *gendarmes* and another fisher, and the two officers threw themselves into the fray, with the result that the next minute Dale was firmly secured and held.

"This is the man, then," panted one of the officers.



"Yes," said the fisherman from the cottage. "I say he tried to strangle this gentleman in the night at my place. Look at his throat."

"It is quite true," said Brettison.

"And you told us, monsieur," cried the fisherman reproachfully, "that your friend was imbecile, and that we need not fear."

"Yes," said Brettison sadly. "I was wrong, but I have been punished for my sin. Malcolm Stratton," he continued, turning to his friend, who stood there with his breast heaving still, and gazing wildly at Myra, who met his eyes with a piteous look, mingled of gratitude, sorrow, and despair, "I call upon you for the sake of all here to denounce this man to the officers."

"I cannot," said Stratton, with a quick look from Myra to Sir Mark and back. "That task shall never be mine."

"Will monsieur say those words in French?" said the officer who had spoken before, and who was busy brushing the sand from his uniform. "I understand English a little, but I cannot trust myself at a time like this."

"Forgive me, then, Sir Mark," said Brettison firmly, and speaking now in excellent French, "and you, too, my child," he said, taking and kissing Myra's hand. "I have tried for your sake and that of the man I love as a son to spare you pain, but the time has come when this must end. Officers, this man, an imbecile save at rare intervals, when he has these violent homicidal fits, is James Barron, or Dale, a convict escaped from one of the English prisons——"

Myra uttered a wild cry and hid her face on her aunt's breast.

"Brettison!" roared Stratton.

"Mr. Brettison, have you taken leave of your senses?" cried Sir Mark. "James Barron!"



"Bah!" said the convict, "the game is up. Henderson's my name, Sam Henderson, James Barron's fellow-prisoner and mate. Poor old Dandy Jem was shot dead that night! Where's Stratton?" he cried, with a curious change coming over him. "Ah! there. Now, man, no shuffling. The game's in my hands, you know. Come, pay up like a man. They're waiting for you—at the church—my wife—what's her name—pretty Myra—my mate Jem's widow—gentleman James, sir—all the swell—but I did it—I engraved the notes."

He smiled and chuckled.

"Proud of them. Puzzled the clever ones. The Rothschilds hardly knew, eh, Jem? Well, you always were a swell. And so you mean to marry the gal? Well, I warn you; it's getting too hot. Better cut off together till the scent's cold. There, I've warned you. I thought so: nabbed. All right, gentlemen, I'll come quietly. Easy with my mate. Going to be married this morning. Do you hear, Stratton? married this morning! My wife, you can have her. My little widow. Hush! quiet, will you. We shall never do it. Oh, yes, I'm game. Ugh, hard work. They're after us, and we shall have to rush 'em. Right, Jem. I'll stand any risk. Hold together, and then down the rocks!"

The man's face was working horribly, and his eyes were dilated with excitement as he rambled on wildly, mingling up the past in one tangle of confusion as he, in brief, gave suggestions to the horrified listeners of the various scenes enacted in his life.

"Now, then," he whispered, "ready. Off. Ah!" he shrieked, "don't shoot—don't shoot. Cowards! Ugh! the water—a long swim—but it's for life—for life; and poor old Jem—handsome Jem, shot—shot!"

The man's whole manner changed; the twitching of the muscles, the excited playing of the nerves, and the wild



look in the eyes gave place to the vacant, heavy stare, and his hand rose slowly to his neck, and played about the back of his ear.

"Shot," he said, "shot," looking up at the admiral and smiling. "A bullet—behind the ear—never found it yet—never found——"

"Quick!" cried Stratton, stepping forward so as to hide the ghastly contortions that crossed the man's face from the ladies clinging together in a frightened group.

"Yes," said Brettison, with a sigh of relief, "for Heaven's sake, officers, take him away."

They bore him instantly toward the boat, just as Myra uttered a low sigh and fainted dead away.

It was some minutes before she came to again, to find Stratton kneeling by her side holding her hand, while the others stood a little aloof.

For a few moments there was a wild and wondering look in her eyes, but it was softened directly by her tears, as she whispered :

"I don't quite grasp it all, Malcolm. Only tell me that is it true—that you really love me, dear?"

"As true as that I can hold your hand in mine, clear from all stain, and that you are free—my love, my wife."

"But," cried the admiral in the further explanations which ensued, "do I understand, my lad, that you all along took this man for Dale?"

"Of course."

"But you had surely seen him at my house?"

"I saw from a distance the man arrested on the wedding morn, but he was surrounded by the crowd, and I never caught his face."

"But you were present at the trial," said Brettison.

"No. I never entered the court. I could not go to gloat over my rival's fall. I merely waited for the result."

"I remember now; I saw you waiting there," said



Brettison thoughtfully. "And I, of course, saw the prisoners side by side, but from the gallery, right behind and far above. I never caught a glimpse of either face until they turned to leave the dock, and then it was this man's only—the other prisoner went first."

"And I could not see in this wretched madman's altered features the scoundrel I had seen in court!" cried the admiral.

"Who could have dreamed it was the same?" cried Guest. "Poor wretch! his face was like an old well-worn shilling till that fit came on. Here! Mal, old fellow, quick!"

"It is nothing—nothing," said Brettison faintly as Stratton saved him from a heavy fall. "My encounter last night—a little giddy still. Your arm, my boy; I'm better now. Well; for have I not saved you both—brought you full happiness and joy?"



## CHAPTER LV.

### THE LAST CLOUD.

**J**ULES, you are a bad—a naughty!” cried Margot angrily. “You and your wife never tell me of what takes place while I sleep; you send me out with my patient, and never tell me he is dangerous; and then you rob me of my bread by getting him sent away. It is ruin, and I must go back to the town and starve.”

“Never,” cried a pleasant little voice behind her; and she turned sharply round to see Edie and Guest, the former smiling through her tears. “Have no fear about that, my poor Margot. Come up to the house and help, as my poor cousin is very weak and ill.”

“My faith, dear miss, I will,” cried the sturdy Breton woman.

In fact, Margot's hands were pretty full during the next month, for she had two patients to tend—at the little château and in the cottage just below.

“Ah! bah, madame,” she said, looking up from her knitting. “What do I do? Nothing. The beloved miss grows better and more beautiful day by day, and is it I? Is it the good physician come from St. Malo? Name of a little cider apple! no. Look at the dear old monsieur there.”

She pointed with a knitting needle to where Brettison sat, propped up in a chair in the shadow of the rock with a table before him, and Miss Jerrold, who looked very old and gray and stately, turned her head, nodded, and went on with the embroidery about which her busy fingers played.



"He says to me, 'You must go up on the cliffs this morning, Margot, and bring me every flower you can find.' I go, madame, and——"

"One moment, Margot ; you always forget I am *mademoiselle*, not *madame*."

"The greater the pity, *mad'moiselle*. You so young looking still you should be the beautiful mother of many children, or a widow like me. What of the *monsieur* ? I take him every morning all the flowers, and there, see, he is as happy with them as a little child. Of my other sick one—look at her——"

She pointed with the other needle just set free to where Myra and Stratton were also seated in the shade gazing dreamily out to where the anchored sailing boats rose and fell upon the calm blue water.

Aunt Jerrold looked through her half-closed eyes, smiled and nodded again.

"Faith of a good woman !" said Margot, "does she want a nurse, does she want a physician ? No. The good doctor is by her side, and ever since the day when the bad man was taken I have seen the beautiful brown of the sea air and the rose of the sun come into her cheeks. It is a folly my being here now, but if *mad'moiselle* and the great sea captain will keep my faithful services till they marry and be happy ; and oh, *mademoiselle*," cried Margot, turning her eyes up toward the sky, and displaying her white teeth, "the way that I adore the dear, dear little children !"

"Margot !" cried Miss Jerrold austere, and she rose and walked away.

"Faith of a good woman ! what have I said ?" muttered Margot, looking now at where Guest and Edie had gone down to a rock pool in which they were fishing with their hands for prawns, but catching each other's fingers instead deep down under the weeds. "They will all marry, and very soon. Ah ! those old maids !"



The one to whom she specially referred had gone to sit down now by her brother, who was scanning a vessel in the offing with his glass.

"French man-of-war, Rebecca," he said. "Fine vessel, but only a confounded imitation of one of ours."

"Yes, dear, I suppose so," said his sister, and she went on with her embroidery.

"Are you getting tired of the place, Mark?" she said suddenly.

"Eh? Tired! What for? It's beautiful and calm, and there's water and a bit of shipping, and everyone seems to be happy and comfortable. Tired? No! Are you?"

"Oh, no, dear, only I thought we could not go on much longer like this."

"Let fate alter it, then," said the admiral gruffly. "Don't catch me at it. Myra hasn't suggested such a thing."

"She? No," said Miss Jerrold quickly. "O Mark!" she cried, "I am so glad to see her happy once again."

"God bless her, yes. I think she must have had all the trouble meant for her life in one big storm, so that she may have a calm passage right to the end."

"I pray that it may be so," said Aunt Jerrold fervently. "How happy she looks."

"Yes," said Sir Mark, closing the glass through which he had watched her while his sister spoke.

They were right, for the calm had come. Seated hand in hand, Stratton had told Myra in the soft, dim light of evening, while the waters murmured at her feet, all the tangle of his troubles, and she had literally forced him to tell her all again and again, for the narrative was never tedious to her as a twice told tale, while the knowledge of all that he had suffered for her sake drew the bond between them in a faster knot.

On this particular morning, when all was bright and



sunny, there yet was one cloud near, for a servant came out from the cottage to say that monsieur was wanted.

Stratton sprang up, and Myra rose and clung to his arm, her eyes dilating with the dread of some new trouble. But he at once calmed her.

"There can be no trouble now that we could not meet," he whispered; and she sank back in her seat to watch him till he disappeared within the door.

The officer who had arrested Henderson was standing in the little room Stratton used, and with him a thin, earnest looking man in black, who seemed to wear an official uniform as well as air.

Bows were exchanged, and then the latter produced some papers.

"I have come, monsieur, respecting the man Barron-Dale," he said in very good English. "As you know, monsieur, we have been in communication with the English authorities, and, as we have reported to you from time to time, there has been a reluctance on their part to investigate the matter."

"Yes, I have heard all this," said Stratton, trying to be calm.

"They were disposed to treat him as an impostor, and at last sent us word definitely that Barron-Dale and Henderson certainly died in their attempt to escape from your great prison. The correspondence has gone on, monsieur, till now, and I believe that the English authorities were about to send an officer to investigate the matter; but, as you have been informed, the man has been growing worse and worse while ill in the infirmary of the prison at Barville. Yesterday he had a bad attack—a fit."

He paused for a moment or two, looking gravely at Stratton.

"The difficulty is solved now, monsieur," said the officer gravely. "He did not recover from the fit. Our doctors



have found the cause of those attacks—a pistol bullet was imbedded close to the brain.”

“The bullet from his own pistol,” thought Stratton. “The shot he meant for me.”

A few minutes after Stratton left the officer, and went straight to where Myra was waiting, trembling with excitement.

“There is some fresh peril, Malcolm,” she cried as she caught his hand.

“No, dearest,” he said slowly; “the last cloud has passed away.”

THE END.



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### HOW I CAME TO WRITE MY FIRST BOOK.

WHEN I was sixteen years old I belonged to a composition class. It was our custom to go on the recitation seat every day with clean slates, and we were allowed ten minutes to write seventy words on any subject the teacher thought suited to our capacity. One day he gave out "What a Man Would See if He Went to Greenland." My heart was in the matter, and before the ten minutes were up I had one side of my slate filled. The teacher listened to the reading of our compositions, and when they were all over he simply said: "Some of you will make your living by writing one of these days." That gave me something to ponder upon. I did not say so out loud, but I knew that my composition was as good as the best of them. By the way, there was another thing that came in my way just then. I was reading at that time one of Mayne Reid's works which I had drawn from the library, and I pondered upon it as much as I did upon what the teacher said to me. In introducing Swartboy to his readers he made use of this expression: "No visible change was observable in Swartboy's countenance." Now, it occurred to me that if a man of his education could make such a blunder as that and still write a book, I ought to be able to do it, too. I went home that very day and began a story, "The Old Guide's Narrative," which was sent to the *New York Weekly*, and came back, respectfully declined. It was written on both sides of the sheets but I didn't know that this was against the rules. Nothing abashed, I began another, and receiving some instruction, from a friend of mine who was a clerk in a book store, I wrote it on only one side of the paper. But mind you, he didn't know what I was doing. Nobody knew it; but one



day, after a hard Saturday's work—the other boys had been out skating on the brick-pond—I shyly broached the subject to my mother. I felt the need of some sympathy. She listened in amazement, and then said: “Why, do you think you could write a book like that?” That settled the matter, and from that day no one knew what I was up to until I sent the first four volumes of Gunboat Series to my father. Was it work? Well, yes; it was hard work, but each week I had the satisfaction of seeing the manuscript grow until the “Young Naturalist” was all complete.

—*Harry Castlemon in the Writer.*

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Mr. Ellis began writing at an early age and his work was acceptable from the first. His parents removed to New Jersey while he was a boy and he was graduated from the State Normal School and became a member of the faculty while still in his teens. He was afterward principal of the Trenton High School, a trustee and then superintendent of schools. By that time his services as a writer had become so pronounced that he gave his entire attention to literature. He was an exceptionally successful teacher and wrote a number of text-books for schools, all of which met with high favor. For these and his historical productions, Princeton College conferred upon him the degree of Master of Arts.

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